Contracted Nonfiction Book Proposals by Fredrik deBoer

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The Seed and the Soil

Fredrik deBoer

Overview

Years ago, I served as a long-term substitute teacher at the public middle school in my hometown. It wasn't a bad gig; the money was alright, the day wasn't too long, and most of the students were pleasant and well-behaved, if not exactly enthusiastic learners.

I was struck while working, though, by the relentless repetition of a single message: that every student was constrained in their lives only by their will, that if they worked hard and never gave up on their dreams, they could do and have anything. If they would only believe, in other words, they would achieve. That effort and commitment were the sole requirements for success in life – not just to be healthy and happy, but to achieve one's most outsized dreams – was the mantra, and it papered the walls.

I can't tell you how many posters hung in this middle school that made this claim, each one expressing one cliché or another about the power of self-belief. I stopped counting after I hit two dozen posters in the months I worked there. They were in just about every classroom, almost without exception. I heard a similar message from a speaker at a school assembly, who asserted the preeminence of work ethic; from the coach of the cross country team, who told his charges that whether they thought they would win or thought they wouldn't, they were right; and a science teacher, who counseled his charges that genius was a fiction and that to be a great scientist only took work and fortitude. Everyone involved was sure that those students who would succeed would be the ones who wanted it the most. I felt, at times, like I was living in a one-party state, where the official propaganda was repeated ad nauseum.

I thought of this insistent message later, when I was working in a different school. That school was in the same district, but the context was very different. It was a special program for children with severe emotional disturbance. The students had mostly been forced to leave other schools in the district, after a parade of detentions and suspensions and parent-principal conferences. The program, for many, was the last chance; the only other place left to go was into the state mental health system or into the juvenile detention system. I was there for about 16 months, after which I quit and went to grad school. The emotional toll was just too great. I have never forgotten the dedicated women who had worked there for decades, and I never will.

One day I sat next to a favorite student, attempting to guide him through long division. I had been told that he had been a hard case, at one point, a real hell raiser, but it was hard to believe. He was a clear success story of the program, and was being gradually phased back into regular classes. He was funny and sweet and had become my buddy. But his behavioral and social improvements had not been matched in his academic work, where he still struggled. Indeed, his now-infrequent behavioral problems emerged only when he was confronted with scholastic work he couldn't complete.

Sitting there, I guided him individually through the steps, again and again. I explained things to him orally and charted it out on paper. I tried to come up with a mnemonic for the steps. We made division into a game, and I tried using incentives like pieces of candy. We kept at it relentlessly, for hours over the course of a week. He genuinely tried. He really, really did. Nothing worked.

At one point he broke out into tears, as he had many times while we tried long division. I exhaled slowly and felt myself give up, though of course I would never tell him so. I tried to

console him, once again, and he said, "I just can't do it." And it struck me, with unusual force, that he was right.

It was then that I thought back to the middle school, to the posters, to the motivational speaker – to all the motivational speakers out there, in our society, to the self-help books and productivity apps and inspirational wall calendars, the entire American culture of success. And it struck me that all the sunny positivity of those pleasant clichés hid a dark and toxic reality. The cruelty of that idea – that we are all so equal in ability that only effort and character can keep us from success – was apparent. The evidence was sitting at a desk in front of me, weeping real tears. What did those posters have to say to him? He had stuck with it for weeks and was no closer to his goal. He had tried and he had failed. Did he just not believe enough?

He had lived a hard life. All of the students there had. And I wanted what anyone would want, for him and his peers to enjoy the same opportunities and the same safe and enriching environment as the students with richer, kinder, more stable parents. I would never doubt that we should strive to give underprivileged kids like him as much support as we can, to use policy to make their environment safer, healthier, and more nourishing. But I also don't doubt that no amount of enriching the environment would be sufficient to erase the academic distance that opens up between individual students in all educational settings without fail. Nor do I accept the implicit idea that efforts to improve the environments of our students are given moral force because they are assumed to lead to improvements in test scores or graduation rates. We should improve the environment of our students because it is our moral responsibility to do so. Giving underserved children better living conditions is an end, not a means.

My student would go on, eventually, to learn long division, though it always took great difficulty. But while he toiled in our classroom, some of his age group peers in the other wing of

the school were learning fractions. A few even were tackling the rudiments of algebra, all before

middle school. It was those students who would, at a later age, be his competition in the great

academic arms race of American college admissions. And, in time, they would be his

competition in the labor market in our new knowledge economy. I lost track of him after I left

that job. I hope the world served him better in the second decade of his life than it did in the first.

I have taught students from kindergarten through graduate school. I have taught black and

Hispanic and Asian and white, men and women, boys and girls. I have taught students from

China and Iran and Bolivia and Kenya. I have taught classes as small as eight students in

intimate conversation groups and dozens in large lecture halls. I have taught in a high-minority

and largely poor public school district and I have tutored the sons and daughters of the

immensely wealthy. There are three things that I have learned that come before everything else,

three lessons that were taught to me while I was teaching others: that all students have something

to learn and something to contribute; that teaching is hard and grueling work; and that students

differ profoundly in their underlying academic ability. This last perception is not just my

anecdotal experience. It is buttressed by a large and growing body of scholarly work which

demonstrates that cognitive traits like intelligence are significantly influenced by genetic

inheritance. That reality – that academic talent is real, that it asserts itself early and often, and

that the difference in talents between individual students is largely a function of their genes – has

been the single most insistence fact of an adult life spent teaching and researching about

teaching.

We have, in the world of education, borrowed a term from agriculture to describe our

students and their talents: we cultivate them. It's the kind of metaphor that's been used so much

it's no longer really a metaphor. But the comparison is a good one. Each student is a seed, and

each seed grows in the soil of the student's environment. In the world today, some seeds are sheltered and nourished, while some are neglected and underfed. We should strive for a world where all seeds grow in healthy, well-tended soil, out of a fundamental commitment to the equal moral value of all. But just as no plant can grow to its full potential height from poor soil, no amount of tending to the soil can make some seeds taller than some others. Some seeds are meant to spawn taller plants than some others. All plants have their own beauty, and all human beings have something of value to contribute to society. But to act as though every human being has the same potential in academic life is no more sensible than expecting every sapling to grow to the same height. It's a fiction, a pleasant fiction, and one we can't keep believing in. The modern science of genetics tells us so.

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Nobody wants to have this conversation. Not liberals and not conservatives, not libertarians or leftists. But we need to have it all the same.

The notion that each of can achieve whatever we imagine if only we have the will fits in perfectly with the American myth. After all, this is the land of the self-made man, a place where anyone can become anything. This is the country of Horatio Alger and his stories of the poor rising up from their station through courage, perseverance, and pluck. Of course, this is also the country of John Steinbeck, of Upton Sinclair, of Bruce Springsteen, those who have pointed out in art and journalism that the deck is stacked, that not everyone gets to play the same cards. We have those who insist that outcomes are the product of hard work or laziness, and we have those who insist that outcomes are the product of chance. But all sides seem convinced that our natural talents are more or less the same.

Conservatives support the idea of equality of talent because they believe it leads to a laissez faire approach to the economy. If everyone has had the same chances, then there is no error in market outcomes for the government to correct with redistribution. ("Why, if my grandfather could come here as a penniless immigrant and rise to wealth….") Liberals support the idea of equality of talent out of a righteous commitment to the equal rights and equal moral value of all people, a commitment I share. But in mistaking that moral equality for equality in all facets of human life, they leave themselves open to criticism on scientific grounds – and, in a weird way, accept the basic conservative premise that economic security and social value must be earned. If you see life as a race, and insist that the outcome is unfair because some people were given a head start, you are still accepting the basic idea that life is a competition. Starting everyone from the same place is one thing. Telling them they can stop running is another.

What we need is an alternative. We need a perspective that rejects bigotry in all of its forms, recognizes the inherent dignity and value of all people, and accepts that an overwhelming body of scientific evidence shows that all people do not have the same academic potential. We need a left that points out that genetic differences in cognitive ability undermines the very notion of just deserts and the basic assumptions of the market economy. What we need is a "hereditarian left," a term coined by the behavioral geneticist Dr. Paige Harden to designate the small but growing number of us who accept contemporary science on human genetics and who see that science as an argument for, not against, left-wing politics.

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For understandable reasons, the left-of-center in American intellectual life has avoided arguments based on the science of human genetic variation. After all, from the eugenics movement to the *Bell Curve* to the Google diversity memo, discussions of inherent talent and

genetic predispositions have been used against people from marginalized groups. It's natural that progressive, educated people would avoid endorsing any argument that seemed similar to those that have been used against black people, women, and other groups.

But this denial of human genetics and their influence on talents and abilities risks throwing out the baby with the bathwater. In particular, these arguments mistake the necessary and correct denial of genetic *group* differences for a rejection of genetic *individual* differences. This dismissal of the existence of hereditary differences between individuals amounts to a rejection of the overwhelming body of relevant scientific evidence. Too many on the left speak as though evolution only functions from the neck down, contradicting the evidence in just the way conservatives contradict the evidence about climate change. What's more, this stance perversely supports a conservative vision of a fair society. If everyone is endowed with the same basic talents, then the argument for laissez faire economics is strengthened, as different outcomes are then more likely to be the result of hard work and individual choices.

Nowhere does this dynamic play out more destructively than in the domain of education. The notion that all students can excel in school is a largely-unspoken but ubiquitous assumption in education policy discussions. Arguments that natural talent restricts the boundaries of the possible are often met with fierce pushback, based on the mistaken notion that anyone speaking frankly about academic talent believes those without it should be left behind. Or, as the director and writer of *Waiting for "Superman"* Davis Guggenheim put it, "Don't tell me these kids can't learn!" But the question is not whether all students can learn. The question is whether all students can meet arbitrary performance benchmarks. And this debate has profound policy implications, as the premise of students as blank slates has led to failed initiatives like No Child Left Behind. By refusing to acknowledge that different students have profoundly different

ability, we spend scare public dollars in a quixotic effort to achieve universal academic excellence. Worse still, in doing so we hold both teachers and students alike to standards they cannot meet.

Instead of denying the truth of individual genetic differences, the left should embrace it. It is the left, after all, that has argued that chance plays an outsized role in determining life outcomes. What could be more susceptible to the vagaries of chance than one's own genetic endowment, which no one can possibly control? The concept of the "veil of ignorance" developed by the great liberal philosopher John Rawls seems perfectly suited to discussion of genetics and talent. If we imagine ourselves behind that veil, we might well ask whether we will be lucky enough to be born with a genetic endowment that predisposes us to better academic outcomes – and in so doing strengthen the case for redistributive policies and a strong social safety net. The proposed book would make the empirical, political, and moral case for the hereditarian left. It would describe the science of individual human differences, contrast that with the false science of group human differences, enumerate the reasons why so many people resist such a large body of science, detail how education has been so deeply distorted by the blank slate assumption, pull apart our implicit assumptions about human value, and chart a better, fairer future.

Author Biography

I am a writer and academic who works in assessment of student learning at Brooklyn College in the City University of New York system. I hold a PhD in English from Purdue University, where I took extensive coursework in pedagogy, testing theory and application,

educational measurement, statistics, and other relevant topics. My job requires me to remain conversant in the latest educational research, and I have a passion for translating complex academic research into plain language for a popular audience. As a writer, I have been published in some of the biggest magazines and newspapers in the world. In print, my work has appeared in *The New York Times Magazine*, *Harper's*, *The Los Angeles Times*, and *The Washington Post*. Online, my work has appeared at places like *Politico*, *Playboy*, *The New Republic*, *Foreign Policy*, *n+1*, *Jacobin*, and many others. I have also worked with the New America Foundation, a leading think tank, on educational issues.

I have the privilege of large networks in both academia and in media, and would be able to spread the word to many leading figures in both worlds.

Audience and Promotion

The book is conceived in the lineage of influential texts like *The Nurture Assumption* and Steven Pinker's *The Blank Slate*. Those books, however, are fundamentally academic in their orientation, as well as decades old. *The Seed and the Soil* will be a political argument as well as an academic one, calling for a society based on universal programs and true societal equality as an alternative to our marketplace of talent. This book would be part of the genre of books that discuss academic research, make it understandable for a popular audience, and use that research to advance political arguments. In other words, this book would fit nicely with the "wonk" tradition in contemporary political discussion. The proposed text would engage and argue with books and articles about human potential and social policy from both the left, such as Chris Hayes's *Twilight of the Elites* and Richard V. Reeves's *Dream Hoarders*, and the right, such as Charles Murray's *Coming Apart* and University of Pennsylvania Professor of Law Amy Wax's recent controversial op-ed about the superiority of "bourgeois values."

I am in a strong position to promote this book. My academic field, the assessment of student learning, is directly relevant to the topics and research discussed in the proposed book. I have a large network in both media and in academia. My work has been discussed in major publications like *The Atlantic, The Wall Street Journal, USA Today, New York Magazine, Slate, The Huffington Post*, and many others. I have many friends within the world of professional political and cultural writing, and I could easily find willing readers to discuss and potentially blurb the book.

The book's major argument is provocative. As I've indicated, both the education policy world and the broad American left-of-center has largely failed to really grapple with these topics, and frequently dismiss arguments about human genetics as inherently conservative, bigoted, or both. Though the book would stand expressly against racist and sexist arguments that are sometimes advanced in the name of genetics, it would still discuss fundamental differences between individual human beings in their basic predispositions and talents. This would likely spark a lively conversation in reviews, essays, and social media. This controversy would generate publicity and attract attention for the book.

Manuscript

Anticipated Length: 200 - 225 pages

Anticipated Completion Date: Six months from proposal acceptance

Chapter Outline

Chapter titles are descriptive and will change in the final manuscript.

Introduction: What This Book Is and What It Isn't

In the introduction, I will succinctly lay out the argument that I intend to make, and reassure readers about the one that I don't intend to make. Using a narrative style, I will talk about my journey through our education system as both a practitioner in tutoring and substitute teaching and as a researcher in academia and the policy world. I will lay out the same basic story I made in this proposal, talking about how the insistence on the equal potential of all children ultimately becomes a form of abuse, leaving students, parents, and teachers with impossible expectations they can't meet. I'll frame the dimensions of my argument and make clear my intention to keep the book data-driven and evidence-based throughout. And I'll place special emphasis on what I'm not arguing, by explicitly and forcefully denying the arguments of pseudoscientific racism and sexism. I will stress that I am writing a book about individual differences, not group differences. This will lead naturally to the first chapter.

Chapter One: On "Scientific" Racism and Sexism

Why are so many people so afraid to acknowledge the existence of individual genetic differences, given the vast body of research demonstrating those differences? To answer that question, we need to understand how ideas about genetics and human potential have been misused in the past. I will therefore being the book with a history, tracing the early eugenics movement and its association with the (capital-P) Progressives of the early 20th century, through the Nazi party and its actions, to *the Bell Curve* and Jason Richwine's controversial work for *The*

New York Times, and finally to the infamous "Google memo" and its arguments about sex differences in areas of academic difference. I argue forcefully that these argument are inherently bigoted and call for the left to resist them.

Chapter Two: The Case for the Heritability of Academic Ability

Politicians and policymakers doggedly cling to the notion that all students have the potential to be academic stars. But the reality of differing academic potential stands as the single most robustly replicated finding in the history of psychology. The second chapter makes the empirical case for the heritability of human cognitive traits, such as academic talent, personality traits, disorders such as mental illness and addiction, and similar. The chapter summarizes the state of contemporary understanding of behavioral genetics, with discussion of twin studies, adoption studies, and genome-wide association studies (GWAS).. I will also lay out the history of public engagement with genetics, including what the media and popular understanding of these topics get wrong. I will conclude with a consideration of new breakthroughs in genetics, including the plummeting costs and popularization of personal genome diagnostics, and what lies ahead as more and more people have their own genetic information provided for them.

Chapter Three: Reconciling the Two

A society that understands the reality of genetic potential could be a society susceptible to even greater racial and gender inequality. It's therefore necessary to make a careful, evidence-based argument against traditional, bigoted ideas about genetic differences between groups. In this chapter, I demonstrate why acknowledging the reality of individual genetic difference does not lead to "scientific" racism or sexism. I discuss the differences between individual variation and group variation, both scientifically and morally, and look at the within-group variation in any

identifiable population – that is, I will show the diversity of outcomes between demographic groupings like sex, race, and the like. Finally, I will argue that the fight to end racism and sexism are in fact strengthened, not weakened, by acknowledging that not all individual humans have the same inherent talents, and make a call to action to continue that fight.

Chapter Four: Our Deluded Educational Policy

Education, the conventional wisdom goes, is the great equalizer. In a fiercely partisan age, the notion that education is the most important tool for fighting poverty and inequality unites the parties. From George W. Bush to Barack Obama, from Silicon Valley moguls to conservative think tank analysts, our political and policy elites are sure that the best way to improve the lot of the poor is with education. The only problem with this idea is that it isn't true. Since not every student has equal potential to be educated, not all of our social problems can be ameliorated through education. In this chapter, I present a large amount of high-quality empirical data to dispute the assumption of universal academic potential., showing that differences in academic ability appear to be largely hereditary and far less mutable than commonly believe. I discuss the policy distortions that arise from this misconception, such as the disastrous No Child Left Behind. I present striking facts about the stability of relative academic rankings over time, such as the fact that third grade reading group is a strong predictor of college completion.

Chapter Five: The God That Failed – Technology, STEM, and Education

Nothing better demonstrates the flawed logic of blank slate thinking quite like our obsession with STEM, both as a means to educate and as a set of subjects for everyone to study. In the 21st century, we're asking technology to save our students, to their detriment and to our economy's. In this chapter, I discuss our mania for technology as a cure for educational woes,

and our insistence on training every young person to be a budding computer science. I present a large number of empirical studies that demonstrate no real impact from the use of technology in the classroom, and call into question basic assumptions about what works in teaching and why. I conclusively debunk the notion of the STEM shortage, showing that it's a media invention with no basis in data. Finally, I discuss the basic economics of skilled labor, pointing out that flooding any one sector of the labor market with skilled workers simply erodes whatever advantage that sector might enjoy. Finally, I look forward to better ways to direct students towards skillsets and academic journeys that are useful and fulfilling.

Chapter Six: A New Educational Philosophy

Recognizing that many students will never have what it takes to excel in the classroom does not mean we should abandon our financial and moral commitments to education. On the contrary, if we recognize the existence of unequal academic potential, we can revitalize our schools, freeing educators and students from the unnecessary drudgery of attempting to bring every student to arbitrary performance benchmarks. In this chapter, I lay out a different philosophy of education, one that rescues teaching and learning from our obsession with metrics and standardized tests. I argue that education is still relevant and worth fighting for despite the persistence of relative academic outcomes, calling for a return to a holistic, humanistic vision of education as a tool to create engaged and moral citizens. I sketch out some policy ideas for how education can be used more humanely and more efficiently. And I articulate a new vision of what role education plays in a society where we are aware that not everyone has the same inherent academic talent.

Chapter Seven: The Rise of Meritocracy and the "Just Deserts" Vision of Economy

In this chapter, I consider the basic liberal and conservative orientations towards merit and the problems with each. To do so, I present a brief history of the basic philosophical conception of "liberalism," in the classical sense, and how it led to both contemporary American progressivism and conservatism. Touching on thinkers like John Locke, Voltaire, and Thomas Jefferson, I will argue that basic ideas about human value have been with us for so long, we have ceased to think of them as ideas at all. I argue that we need a new paradigm to account for new data and to envision a better society.

Chapter Eight: A New Kind of Equality

The consequences of unequal inherent ability are vast – and potentially destructive, if we do not strive to meet them humanely. To ensure a better future, we must clearly articulate a new moral vision for society. In this chapter, I make the case that a world where genetics play a major role in human outcomes such as education and employment is a world where only a socialist system can be truly just. I discuss the incoherence of the ideal of equality of opportunity, and I sketch out a better, more humane vision of summative equality. I argue that the ideals of equal opportunity and equal outcomes must be replaced with the ideals of procedural equality and summative equality. I articulate the moral case for summative equality as a natural and necessary pursuit of a free, moral society. I then consider how best to achieve that vision in the next chapter.

Chapter Nine: Building a Better Society and a Policy to Get There

A moral vision is useless without a policy agenda, and so I will lay out, in detail and buttressed by a large body of research, a specific and practical plan for making a more just

society. This chapter tells us what we should do once we recognize that different human beings have different talents, from a policy perspective. Drawing on the work of John Marsh, the author of *Class Dismissed,* and the leftist policy analyst Matt Bruenig, I argue that redistributive policies have far better humanitarian and social outcomes than alternatives like universal college or vocational training programs. I lay out what the correct policy response might look like, considering possibilities like a federal jobs guarantee or universal basic income (UBI). Finally, I argue that the market is an inherently unfair force in human life, and lead into the next chapter, where I lay out an alternative vision of morality and just deserts.

Epilogue: The Sad Reality and a Happier Future

I begin this chapter by writing frankly about my struggles with bipolar disorder, tying it to the topic by discussing my father and his father, who like me were academics, like me were socialists, like me suffered from a mood disorder, and like me had problems with alcohol. I also discuss our shared facility in school, our height, our advantages as white men. I acknowledge the inherent unfairness of genetic lineage, to lament that the facts I have laid out are indeed facts. I will explore what it might mean to be someone who has lost the genetic lottery, and what the winners might do – and might give up – to help them. I finish with a consideration of human value, why we value what and who we do, and whether we can change, for the good of all of us.

With the best of intentions, the contemporary American left has largely rejected the modern science of human genetics, which not only pits us against the scientific consensus, but also deprives us of one of the most powerful arguments for mass redistribution of wealth.

Chapter xx. Policy Delusions

There's a line of thought floating around out there that asks not whether genes influence intelligence but why we should care. Outside of the general sense of research for its own sake, this line of questioning goes, why open this can of worms? Why does the relationship between genetic heritage and intelligence matter? Why bother to wander into such inherently uncomfortable territory? For me, the most obvious answer is this: because our education politics and policy are deeply affected by our assumptions about natural talent and its mutability, and the consequences are profound – economically, socially, and politically.

The Key, or the Lock?

Education, we are relentlessly told, is the key. The key to what varies – to social mobility, to reducing inequality, to ending poverty, to the American dream. It seems education is a key that can open any lock.

The obsession with education as the primary means to solve social problems is a cross-ideological and bipartisan aspect of contemporary American political life. "In the 21st century," said former President Barack Obama, "the best anti-poverty program is a world-class education." His predecessor, George W. Bush, spoke with similar insistence about the importance of education, saying "There's no greater challenge than to make sure that every child… regardless of where they live, how they're raised, the income level of their family, every child receive a first-class education in America." The conservative Republican Bush would join hands with liberal Democrat Ted Kennedy to bring the country No Child Left Behind, which we will return

to in a moment. Bush's predecessor, Bill Clinton, said during his presidency that "in the new economy, information, education, and motivation are everything." And *his* predecessor, George H.W. Bush, said that "Education is the key to opportunity. It's a ticket out of poverty."[1]

This is the story that our policy elites want to tell. From both parties comes the clamor for more or better education. They disagree about why our educational outcomes aren't better, blaming poverty or teacher unions as politics might dictate. And they disagree about how to fix them, calling for more school "choice" or more school funding, depending on party. But they are sure that only education can solve our country's deep socioeconomic woes.

This is, in some ways, a pleasant story. As someone who values education and teachers, it could be a useful story, depending on how it's told. As an educator myself, it can be a flattering story. But it's a false story, another fiction advanced to paper over elementary aspects of the human condition. Our certainty about how education works, what it changes and who it helps, is built on a myth: the myth of equal inherent ability. As we've seen, the idea that all children enjoy more or less the same academic potential, and can excel if only they enjoy stable parenting, a healthy environment, and good teaching cannot withstand scientific scrutiny. It's precisely this conceit that dominates education politics and policy, and the consequences hurt students, teachers, parents, and taxpayers.

Many will complain that there are of course programs that can bring all kinds of students to academic excellence. They always have a nephew who excelled in a Montessori program, a coworker who swears by the local Catholic school, an article they read about the power of Head Start. This attitude, while sincere and typically expressed out of genuine concern for the most

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[1] Citations TK

disadvantaged, stems from a fundamental misunderstanding about how academic excellence is achieved. To a striking degree, our misapprehensions about the power of schooling to change the world stems from a simple but powerful kind of fallacy: the failure to recognize selection bias.

Selection Bias: The First Mover in Education Metrics

In the social sciences, we want to control for as many variables as we can. When we try to find associations, and especially when we want to prove causation, we need to make sure that the observed difference between groups is the product of our variable of interest. That is, we want to make sure that the students in different groups are only different in the way that we care about. If there's some way in which the groups we're studying are somehow systematically different, we can't draw fair conclusions about what we're looking for. So, for example, if we want to see whether there's educational advantages to using an e-textbook compared to a regular paper textbook, we would want to randomly place students into one group or the other, rather than just giving one class the ebook and one class the paper book. Otherwise, how the students were sorted into the two classes could confound our analysis.

Think about it. Suppose I just decided to use preexisting class rosters as my sorting mechanism. I'm already teaching two sections of the same class, one at 9:30 and one at 12:30, so I'll just give the first class the paper book and the second class the ebook. Then I can see if there's a difference between them. Simple, right? Except that there are almost certainly non-random ways that students are being selected into the two classes. For example, suppose students who are taking a particular major have to take an important seminar that conflicts with the 9:30 class. They would be systematically excluded from our analysis. And that kind of systematic

non-random distribution can truly wreak havoc with our analysis. That's why we work so hard to get truly random distributions in research, so that every test subject has the same odds of getting sorted into one group or another.

Practically, though, genuine random sorting in educational contexts is quite difficult. True randomized experiments – where students are sorted individually into different groups by random selection – are rare in educational research, although this is slowly changing. Why? Consider the practical considerations here. In the ebook vs. paper book example, I wouldn't simply have a set of student test subjects hanging out that I can divide into different groups. The studied students would already be sorted into one class or another, and they have to be studied in situ, most of the time. An education researcher does not have the luxury of control that's enjoyed by researchers in some other fields.

Even when you can sort students into groups, it's hard to randomize them individually. Think about it: it would be difficult or impossible for a teacher to use the paper book with some of his or her students and the ebook with some others. It would be hard for him or her to direct students to the appropriate section in two different formats. (To say nothing of how much the students would complain if they didn't get the cool ebook version.) So we tend to have randomization by groups, rather than by individuals, with one class getting one treatment and the other getting the other treatment. This has a tendency to undermine the validity of our observations. There are ways to account for this with statistical techniques like multilevel modeling, but still these procedures fall short of the gold standard of randomized controlled experiments.

Many researchers cannot randomize at all. Suppose you're studying the effects of lead on academic ability. Could you randomly assign half of your research subjects to be deliberately

exposed to lead? I certainly hope not. In these cases, we are often force to conduct observational and correlation studies.

At least in the case of research we are making an effort to compare like with like. In the general, amateur discussions of high school that do so much to influence our national education conversation, the problem is much deeper. Parents, teachers, journalists, even some professors and policy analysts – all routinely fail to account for the underlying differences in populations that confound our observations of educational quality. Selection bias is the first mover in education, the most powerful, most distorting influence, and almost no one talks about it.

Probably the most glaring example of this kind of bad reasoning takes place when people assume that private schooling is superior to public. My hometown had three high schools, the local coed public high school (where I went), and both a boys and girls private Catholic high school. People involved with the private high schools liked to brag about the high scores their students scored on standardized tests – without bothering to mention that you had to score well on such a test to get into them in the first place. This is, as I've said before, akin to having a height requirement for your school and then bragging about how tall your student body is. Schools that use a screening mechanism specifically designed to exclude the students who are less likely to exceed can't then turn around and assume that the strong outcomes of their students says something positive about the efficacy of their teaching.

Of course, there's another set of screens involved here that also powerfully shape outcomes: private schools cost a lot of money, and so students who can't afford to attend are screened out. Students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds have consistently lower performance on a broad variety of metrics, such as SAT scores, and so private schools are again

advantaged in comparison to public.[2] To draw conclusions about educational quality from student outcomes without rigorous attempts to control for differences in which students are sorted into which schools, programs, or pedagogies – without randomization – is to ensure that you'll draw unsupported conclusions. And when we look at the impact of private schools on students who would ordinarily have been screened out, such as in the Washington DC voucher program, the outcomes are discouraging, running to disastrous.[3]

Unfortunately, the general thrust of public opinion on education usually stems from just this kind of false inference. Take the "immigrant advantage." Immigrant students in American schools typically outperform their domestic peers. The reasons for this dynamic typically advanced by those of a socially conservative bent are big on terms like "culture" and "attitude," vague notions of perseverance and work ethic. The observed differences in outcomes is routinely chalked up to the immigrant willingness to strive and persevere, fitting in nicely with the American mythos of the (white, European, assimilating) striving immigrant. But are those cultural and social differences really the source of this advantage? No. Selection bias is at play: those who can legally immigrate to the United States are generally those that enjoy social and economic privilege back home. Research suggests that these differences explain most of the observed difference.[4]

Consider the category of "Asian American," a group generally described as a model of educational success. Frequently, Asian Americans are represented as the new "model minority,"

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[2] See, for example, Rampell, Catherine. "SAT scores and family income." *New York Times* (2009).

[3] Dynarski, Mark, Ning Rui, Ann Webber, and Babette Gutmann. "Evaluation of the DC Opportunity Scholarship Program: Impacts after One Year. NCEE 2017-4022." National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance (2017).

[4] Feliciano, Cynthia, and Yader R. Lanuza. "An immigrant paradox? Contextual attainment and intergenerational educational mobility." *American Sociological Review* 82, no. 1 (2017): 211-241.

thanks to their strong educational metrics and rapidly-improving socioeconomic status. The Yale Law professor Amy Chua has made a second career for herself by invoking the superior values of her Chinese heritage, arguing in her notorious 2011 book *Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother* and 2014's *The Triple Package* (co-authored by her husband) that these values are key to success.

But there is in fact a great deal of variation within the term "Asian American," a category so broad as to be nearly meaningless. In particular, Chinese, Korean, and Japanese Americans tend to handily outperform Cambodian, Laotian, and Vietnamese Americans in educational and economic stats.[5] Is this because those groups lack the immigrant work ethic and culture of perseverance? A far simpler explanation is that Chinese, Korean, and Japanese Americans tend to be, or to be descended from, immigrants who came to the United States voluntarily, meaning that they enjoyed sufficient economic and social standing back home to make the trip. Meanwhile, Cambodian, Laotian, and Vietnamese Americans tend to be, or be descended from, refugees who fled from their countries, very often with little more than the clothes on their backs. Failure to understand these systematic differences in population formation is the basis of selection bias.

Most people fail to take these conditions into account even when it should be obvious. At Purdue, where there is a large Chinese student population, I always chuckled to hear domestic students say "Chinese people are all so rich!" It didn't seem to occur to them that attending a school that costs better than $40,000 a year for international students acted as a natural screen to exclude the vast number of Chinese people who live in deep poverty. But I too would sometimes

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[5] TK

fall prey to this kind of thinking. I had to take care to remind myself that my 8:30 AM writing classes weren't going so much better than my 2:30 PM classes because I was somehow a better teacher in the mornings, but because the students who would sign up for an 8:00 AM class were probably the most motivated and prepared. We all need to be aware of how deeply unequal populations influence our perceptions of educational quality.

Sometimes, selection effects are deliberately hidden in education. In 2013, the news agency Reuters undertook an exhaustive investigation of the ways that charter schools deliberately exclude the hardest-to-educate students, despite the fact that most are ostensibly required to accept all kinds of students, as public schools are bound to. For all the talk of charters as some sort of revolution in effective public schooling, what Reuters found is that charter administrators work feverishly to tip the scales, finding all kinds of crafty ways to ensure that they don't have to educate the hardest students to educate.[6]

And even when we look past all of the dirty tricks that school administrators can use – like, say, requiring parents to attend meetings held at specific times when most working parents can't – there are all sorts of ways in which students are assigned to charter schools non-randomly, to the of advantage those schools. Excluding students with cognitive and developmental disabilities is a notorious example. (Despite what some assume, many students with special needs take state-mandated standardized tests and are included in data like graduation rates, in most locales.) Simply the fact that parents typically have to opt in to charter school lotteries for their students to attend functions as a screening mechanism.

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[6] Simon, Stephanie. "Class Struggle: How Charter Schools Get the Students They Want." Reuters, February 2013.

Sometimes selection bias slips in the back door. Take the Stanford University Center for Research on Education Outcomes (CREDO) studies on charter school efficacy. The 2009 study notoriously found that, after years of charter school triumphalism and no excuses rhetoric, charters actually underperformed regular public schools in their observed metrics.[7] But the 2013 follow-up study found that charters had in fact pulled even with publics in math and were running slightly ahead in reading.[8] Proponents of charter schools crowed, arguing that they had proven that the charter model was the key to better outcomes.

But there was a dirty little secret hiding in CREDO's report. While school reformers beat their chests, a major caveat lurked in the actually test of the report: charters had "made modest progress in raising student performance in both reading and mathematics, caused in part by the closure of 8 percent of the charters…." Remarkable how you can achieve modest gains when 8% of your data, almost certainly drawn from the lowest performing schools, drops out of your data set! It's remarkable that a study with the pedigree of the CREDO reports did not acknowledge that this undermined the basic claims of improving metrics. As a pseudonymous writer argued on the blog Edushyster at the time, this tactic is similar to one undertaken by hedge fund managers when they argue that hedge funds outperform the rest of the market, neglecting to note that funds that close down due to poor performance are therefore excluded from the data.[9]

At times, charters are not benefiting from selection bias, but rather serving as a means to create it. Consider so-called alternative charters. They have been sold by their boosters as a means to turn around struggling school districts by boosting graduation rates, giving struggling students a fresh start and a different curriculum. But in fact, they mostly help struggling school

[7] CREDO 2009
[8] CREDO 2013
[9] Edushyster cite

districts by finding a way to offload students. A report by the nonprofit journalism organization ProPublica showed that the alternative charter schools in Orlando, Florida – one of the 10 largest districts in the country – essentially acted as warehouses for poorly-performing students.[10] By shuffling the hardest students to educate out of their doors and off of their books, the schools created artificially inflated graduation numbers. Funny how that works.

I find it's nearly impossible to get people to think about selection bias when they consider schools and their quality. Parents look at a private school and say, look, all these kids are doing so well, I'll send my troubled child and he'll do well, too. They look at the army of strivers marching out of Stanford with their diplomas held high and say, boy, that's a great school. And they look at the Harlem Children's Zone schools and celebrate their outcome metrics, without pausing to consider that it's a lot easier to get those outcomes when you're constantly expelling the students most predisposed to fail. But we need to look deeper and recognize these dynamics if we want to evaluate the use of scarce educational resources fairly and effectively.

Tell me how your students are getting assigned to your school, and I can predict your outcomes – not perfectly, but well enough that it calls into question many of our core presumptions about how education works.

Miracles, Real or Imagined

The consequences of our ignorance about selection bias, and our tendency to credulously accept pleasant fables about educational miracles, has real political and policy consequences. No example could be more trenchant than that of the so-called "Texas miracle" and the disastrous rollout of No Child Left Behind.

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[10] ProPublica

The bipartisan NCLB, signed by George W. Bush and aggressively championed by liberal lion Ted Kennedy, was frequently sold with reference to the supposedly-miraculous turnaround in Texas school systems like that of Houston. While campaigning for the presidency in the 2000 election, Bush had aggressively advanced his credentials as an education reformer who got results, claiming that test scores and graduation rates had risen in Texas thanks to lots of testing and a "get tough" attitude towards teachers and schools. This model – constant testing and the promise of harsh punishments for those educators whose students struggled on those tests – did not originate with Texas or Bush, but in many ways his presidency was a high-water mark for a bipartisan embrace of "no excuses" education reform.

Sadly for those enamored with this model, it didn't work.

Retrospective considerations of Texas's supposed gains were far less rosy. You can probably guess where the purported miracles came from at this point: struggling students were systematically excluded from the data, creating an artificial inflation in the numbers. A 2003 *New York Times* investigation found that, "Compared with the rest of the country, Houston's gains on the national exam the Stanford Achievement Test, were modest. The improvements in middle and elementary school were a fraction of those depicted by the Texas test and were similar to those posted on the Stanford test by students in Los Angeles…. the

Texas Education Agency found rampant undercounting of school dropouts."[11] This failure to account for dropouts is an example survivorship bias, a particularly common subset of selection bias that crops up in education metrics all the time. Because those who drop out of school or are otherwise removed from the sample are much more likely to be among those

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[11] Schemo, Diana J., and Ford Fessenden. "Gains in Houston schools: How real are they." *New York Times* 3 (2003).

struggling, failure to control for them artificially inflates numbers. (This is particularly acute in some metrics of college performance, given that only about half of students who start college graduate in six years, nationally.)

And so a key part of the story selling a no excuses model was revealed, in time, to be a trick of the numbers. No Child Left Behind, of course, would come to be seen as one of the most disastrous education laws in our country's history. Disastrous, and deeply telling. The law had required truly universal standards for schools, insisting on literal 100% compliance with federally-mandated performance benchmarks. Inevitably, state after state and district after district failed to meet these federal standards, compelling the Department of Education to issue exemptions in mass. The basic reality of inherent talent – the fact that there is a distribution of academic ability within any identifiable subset of children, and that this talent distribution asserts itself regardless of educational context and in spite of any policy efforts to deny it – meant that the law was doomed to fail. Teachers and schools were held to impossible standards, students were forced to endure endless hours of mind-numbing testing, the for-profit companies that designed those tests took hundreds of millions of tax dollars, and a few political careers were made. And for what?

No Child Left Behind epitomized the modern conception of education. Its champions treated any talk of fundamental differences in academic ability between individual students as nihilism, excuse making on the behalf of teacher unions, as a form of abandoning vulnerable children. The law required one to believe that the only thing necessary for a country of over 300 million people to achieve universal academic excellence was adequate political will. If only we wanted it enough, no child would be "left behind" by failing to measure up to arbitrary performance standards imposed by fiat from above. In this dogged belief in the power of policy

to defy common sense about relative academic ability, NCLB was merely a symptom of a larger disease, one that remains uncured.

In 2015, amid the intense partisanship of the Obama era, Democrats and Republicans nevertheless came together to scrap NCLB. The law's failures had become too abundant to ignore. The bill that replaced it was to some degree an improvement, giving more local control to states and ending the absurd, unworkable goal of 100% compliance with standards. And yet the new law's title does not inspire confidence that we've reached a new era of educational realism: the Every Student Succeeds Act.

Does School Quality Matter? Not Really

In fact, I will go a step further: school quality simply doesn't matter very much when it comes to quantitative educational outcomes. In fact it doesn't make much sense to even think in terms of school quality, given how student-side variables (those aspects of a given student and his or her life that schools and teachers can't control) dominate school-side variables. Educators just don't control much compared to the impact of inherent ability.

It's here that I will probably lose some people, but the data is fairly clear. I leave it to the Adam Smith Institute's Ben Southwood to summarize the relevant literature:

> Random selection into a better school in Beijing has no effect,[12] random selection into a better school in Chicago has close to no effect,[13] random selection into a better

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[12] TK

[13] Cullen, Julie Berry, Brian A. Jacob, and Steven Levitt. "The effect of school choice on participants: Evidence from randomized lotteries." Econometrica 74, no. 5 (2006): 1191-1230.

Kenyan school has no effect,[14] nor does it in Missouri,[15] nor in New York City.[16] Once you control for student characteristics, Australian private schools didn't outperform state schools on the 2009 PISA.[17] Conscription into extra education didn't much affect life outcomes in late 1970s France.[18] In 1950s England, going to an elite school made no difference to a youth's job market outcomes.[19] The literature is huge and there are many many more examples.

This is the kind of claim that makes people very upset, and across ideological lines. Conservatives and school reformers don't like it because they see it as a shirking of responsibility, as just another excuse to spare those lousy teachers and their unions from accountability. Liberals don't like it because they see it as foreclosing the possibility for success

Consider the case of Hunter College High School in New York, a prestigious and selective public institution. Hunter is one of New York's "exam schools," schools that require a certain score on an entrance exam. The competition is truly fierce in the ultra-competitive world of New York parenting and the stakes are understood to be very, very high. After all, these schools boast impressive alumni rolls, with Hunter having seen figures like Supreme Court justice Elena Kagan and *Hamilton* superstar Lin Manuel Miranda pass through its doors.

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[14] Lucas, Adrienne M., and Isaac M. Mbiti. "Effects of school quality on student achievement: Discontinuity evidence from Kenya." American Economic Journal: Applied Economics 6, no. 3 (2014): 234-263.

[15] Arcidiacono, Peter, and Cory Koedel. "Race and college success: evidence from Missouri." American Economic Journal: Applied Economics 6, no. 3 (2014): 20-57.

[16] Dobbie, Will, and Roland G. Fryer Jr. "The impact of attending a school with high-achieving peers: Evidence from the New York City exam schools." American Economic Journal: Applied Economics 6, no. 3 (2014): 58-75.

[17] Mahuteau, Stephane, and Kostas G. Mavromaras. "Student Scores in Public and Private Schools: Evidence from PISA 2009." (2014).

[18] Mouganie, Pierre. "Conscription and the returns to education: Evidence from a regression discontinuity." (2015).

[19] Clark, Damon, and Emilia Del Bono. "The long-run effects of attending an elite school: evidence from the UK." (2014).

I choose this example, in particular, because left-leaning political writer, MSNBC host, and Hunter College alum Chris Hayes devotes considerable time to discussing the school in his 2012 book, *Twilight of the Elites.* Hayes's book, an entertaining assault on our society's technocrats and political leadership, unravels the myth of American meritocracy and demonstrates all the ways that our political and policy elites have failed to justify their station. But Hayes seems compelled to advance a false history of the school as a place where, once, any student could rise above.

Hayes draws from his own life, describing how elite parents have come to undermine the meritocratic value of Hunter by sending their children to expensive test prep programs. "When I was eleven there was no test prep industry, but that's no longer the case… the wealthier precincts of Manhattan are home to a flourishing tutoring industry, where parents can afford the $90-an-hour price hire private tutors for one-on-one sessions with their children."[20] This clearly represents the elite unfairly perpetuating their privilege, as attending exclusive schools like Hunter prepares students for life far better than regular New York high school. "Hunter is, in its own imagination, a place where anyone with drive and brains can be catapulted from the anonymity of working class outer-borough neighborhoods to the inner sanctum of the American elite."

It's a compelling story. But a false one. *Once you correct for ability*, attending schools like Hunter makes no difference. Several high-quality studies have been performed evaluating the real impact of selective public high schools. That attending those high schools simply doesn't matter in terms of conventional educational and life outcomes. We research this through what's

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[20] Hayes, Christopher. *Twilight of the elites: America after meritocracy*. Broadway Books, 2013.

sometimes called a "last in, last out" model. Inevitably, with tests like those used at exam schools, you'll have students of very similar ability right below the cutoff line and right above it. Test takers who are very closely bunched together have closely matching underlying ability. And when looking at those who are bunched together on either side of the exam cutoff score, we find no difference in things like college completion rates, unemployment rates, and income level. It just doesn't matter.

Of course when you have a mechanism in place to screen out all of the students with the biggest disadvantages, you end up with an impressive-looking set of alumni. The admissions procedures at these schools don't determine which students get the benefit of a better education; the perception of a better education is itself an artifact of the admissions procedure. The screening mechanism is the educational mechanism.

Oh, and about those test prep courses. There are no studies on Hunter College's exam and attendant test prep programs. But we do have a number of studies on the impact of test prep classes and tutoring when it comes to major college admissions tests like the SAT and ACT. And the results are uniformly unimpressive, with typical improvements being in the low-to-mid double digits on a 1600-point scale. Test prep doesn't work. We know that from data collected as part of the National Educational Longitudinal Study of 1988.[21] We know it from College Board survey data from 1995.[22] We know it from a study on MCAT test prep from 2010.[23] We know it

[21] Briggs, Derek C. "The effect of admissions test preparation: Evidence from NELS: 88." *Chance* 14, no. 1 (2001): 10-18.
[22] Powers, Donald E., and Donald A. Rock. "Effects of Coaching on SAT® I: Reasoning Scores." *ETS Research Report Series* 1998, no. 2 (1998).
[23] McGaghie, William C., Steven M. Downing, and Ramune Kubilius. "What is the impact of commercial test preparation courses on medical examination performance?." *Teaching and Learning in Medicine* 16, no. 2 (2004): 202-211.

from admissions testing for medical school in Australia.[24] And the modest gains that are seen from these classes and tutoring look even worse when you consider that test takers often receive a minor bump simply from taking the test again, likely due to their greater comfort and familiarity with the test.

Though his heart is in the right place, Hayes has told a story that fails in both directions at once. He asserts a cause that actually doesn't matter much (test prep courses) for an effect that doesn't matter much (sending a kid to Hunter College instead of a regular NYC public high school). What actually does matter is the underlying distribution of talent in the populations he's describing. The students who are just on the wrong side of the cutoff line to get into Hunter will be fine. It's the students who won't come close to attending that kind of school, the kids who struggle in comparison to the median student and not just to the elite, who we need to worry about, who we need to craft policy to help.

But what about the Harvards and Yales? Surely, they offer serious advantages for their graduates, right? No, so long as you're controlling for ability to effects. In college, the selection dynamic is even more pronounced. The entire edifice of college admissions stands as a massive effort to create unequal student populations. Well-heeled schools spend millions of dollars to ensure that their student bodies are not like those of other schools.

Here's an image that I often use to illustrate a far broader set of realities in education.

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[24] Griffin, Barbara, David W. Harding, Ian G. Wilson, and Neville D. Yeomans. "Does practice make perfect? The effect of coaching and retesting on selection tests used for admission to an Australian medical school." *The Medical Journal of Australia* 189, no. 5 (2008): 270-273.

Figure 1: Relationship Between CLA Performance and Incoming Academic Ability
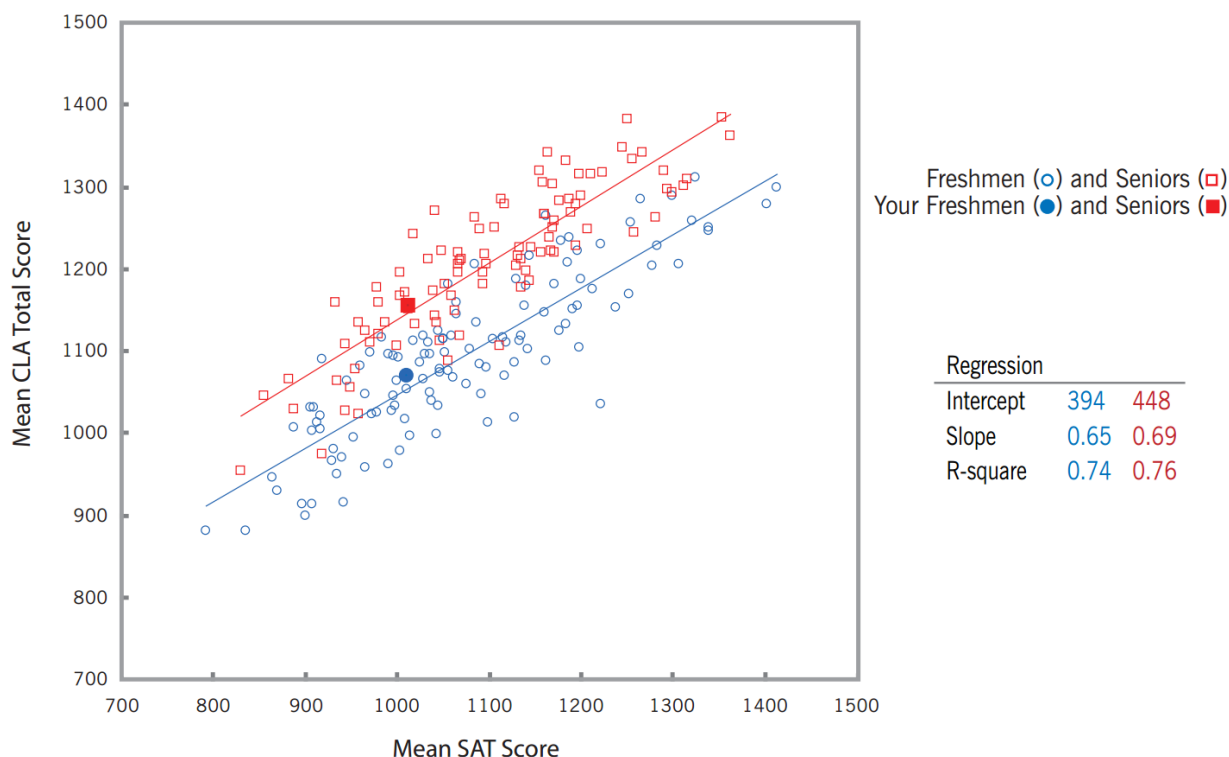
It's a regression analysis showing institutional averages for the Collegiate Learning Assessment, a standardized test of college learning and the subject of my dissertation. Each dot is a college's average score. The blue dots are average scores for freshmen; the red dots, for seniors. The gap between the red and blue dots shows the degree of learning going on in this data set, which is robust for essentially all institutions.

The very strong relationship between SAT scores and CLA scores show the extent to which different incoming student populations – the inherent, powerful selection bias of the college admissions process – determine different test outcomes. (Note that very similar relationships are observed in similar tests such as ETS's Proficiency Profile.) To blame educators at a school on the left hand side of the regression for failing to match the schools on the right

hand side of the graphic is to punish them for differences in the prerequisite ability of their students.

Harvard students have remarkable post-collegiate outcomes, academically, professionally, and socially. But then, Harvard invests millions of dollars carefully managing their incoming student bodies. The truth is most Harvard students are going to be fine wherever they go, and so our assumptions about the quality of Harvard's education itself are called into question. A high-quality longitudinal study found that, in cohorts of college students from both the 1970s and the 1990s, the returns from attending an elite college were effectively nil, *once you controlled for SAT scores.*[25] Once you compare like for like, and look at students of similar underlying ability, attending a prestigious schools makes no difference.

The point is not to argue that Harvard or similar elite schools don't do a good job of preparing their students for their futures. The point is that the students of these colleges would likely excel no matter where they went to school. Their underlying academic ability trumps the importance of their individual college.

Does Anything Work?

As mentioned above, the most certain means of avoiding selection bias, randomized controlled trials, are difficult to pull off in educational research. We are however starting to see more and more of them in the archives, owing in part to growing understanding of just how powerfully selection bias shapes outcomes. Unfortunately for reformers, such research has mostly found little in the way of positive outcomes for students.

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[25] Dale, Stacy, and Alan B. Krueger. Estimating the return to college selectivity over the career using administrative earnings data. No. w17159. National Bureau of Economic Research, 2011.

Take a recent meta-analysis looking at interventions for students from poorer socioeconomic backgrounds, a vulnerable population that tends to struggle in the classroom. A meta-analysis is a type of research that aggregates many studies together, in order to have more confidence about their findings. Individual studies, even high-quality studies, can be subject to a host of hidden biases that might lead us astray. By pooling together the outcomes of many different studies, and using quality controls to determine which studies are included, meta-analysis can serve as better guides for policy. Before we look at one in particular, a brief word on how they work.

The term "statistically significant" appears in discussions of research all the time, but as you often hear, statistical significance is not the same thing as practical significance. And it's true and important to understand. Statistical significance tests are performed to help ascertain the likelihood that a perceived quantitative effect is a figment of our data. So we have some hypothesis (giving kids an intervention before they study will boost test scores, say) and we also have the null hypothesis (kids who had the intervention will not perform differently than those who didn't take it). After we do our experiment we have two average test scores for the two groups, and we know how many of each we have and how spread out their scores are (the standard deviation). Afterwards we can calculate a p-value, which tells us the likelihood that we would have gotten that difference in average test scores or better even if the null was actually true. Stat heads hate this kind of language but casually people will say that a result with a low p-value is likely a "real" effect.

For all of its many problems, statistical significance testing remains an important part of navigating a world of variability. But note what a p-value is not telling us: the actual strength of

the effect. That is, a p-value helps us have confidence in making decisions based on a perceived difference in outcomes, but it can't tell us how practically strong the effect is. So in the example above, the p-value would not be an appropriate way to report the size in the differences in averages between the two groups. Typically people have just reported those different averages and left it at that. But consider the limitations of that approach: frequently we're going to be comparing different figures from profoundly different research contexts and derived from different metrics and scales. So how can we responsibly compare different studies and through them different approaches? By calculating and reporting effect size.

We frequently compare different interventions and outcomes through reference to the normal distribution and standard deviation. That allows us to make easy comparisons between positions on different scales. You look at the normal distribution and can say OK, students in group A were this far below the mean, students in group B were this far above it, and so we can say responsibly how different they are and where they stand relative to the norm. Pragmatically speaking, there's only about three standard deviations of space below and above the mean in normally-distributed data. So when we say that someone is a standard deviation above or below someone else, that gives you a sense of the scale we're talking about here. Of course, the context and subject matter makes a good deal of difference too.

There's lots of different ways to calculate effect sizes, though all involve comparing the size of the given effect to the standard deviation. (Remember, standard deviation is important because spread tells us how much we should trust a given average. If I give a survey on a 0-10 scale and I get equal numbers of every number on that scale – exactly as many 0s, 1s, 2s, 3s, etc. – I'll get an average of 5. If I give that same survey and everyone scores a 5, I still get an average of 5. But for which situation is 5 a more accurate representation of my data?) In the original

effect size, and one that you still see sometimes, you simply divide the difference between the averages by the pooled standard deviations of the experiments you're comparing, to give you Cohen's d. There are much fancier ways to calculate effect size, but that's outside the bounds of this post.

A meta-analysis takes advantage of the affordances of effect size to compare different interventions in a mathematically responsible way. A meta-analysis isn't just a literature review; rather than just reporting what previous researchers have found, those conducting a meta-analysis use quantitative data made available to researchers to calculate pooled effect sizes. When doing so, they weight the data by looking at the sample size (more is better), the standardized deviation (less spread is better), and the size of the effect. There are then some quality controls and attempts to account for differences in context and procedure between different studies. What you're left with is the ability to compare different results and discuss how big effects are in a way that helps mitigate the power of error and variability in individual studies.

The meta-analysis I refer to here looked at a wide variety of interventions designed to help poor students, such as So what did researchers find when they look at studies from the past 15 years, three quarters of which were randomized controlled experiments? Perhaps the easiest summary is "not much." Of 25 studies looking at interventions in math skills, for example, only 6 had a positive effect that was statistically different from 0. The average effect size of those studies was less than .1 of a standard deviation. For context, the black-white racial achievement gap in many academic metrics is a full 1.0 standard deviation. One study in the analysis had greater than a standard deviation effect size, but its overall impact on the meta-analysis was tiny

due to a low sample size and very wide spread of effects. (That is, the study's subjects had a great range of outcomes even though the overall effect size was large.)

Breaking the studies down by intervention type looks even more bleak. Most simply didn't work. Afterschool programs, student incentives, student coaching, psychological and behavioral interventions, computer-assisted instruction: none were statistically significant. And some that were statistically significant, such as increased school resources, had such small effect sizes that their practical impact was nil. The single largest effect size, at about .35 of a standard deviation, was small group or one-on-one tutoring. That's not nothing, and I support programs to introduce more tutoring into public schools. But in a given classroom, the worst performing students might trail the best performing by two standard deviations on a given test. How exactly are we supposed to bring them up to the level of their elite peers if we're playing with such small effect sizes?

This is just one meta-analysis, although a particularly large and high-quality one. But the finding here is common to educational research writ large: the larger, more representative, and higher quality a study is, the more likely it is to find very small effects. The research is littered with failed interventions and statistically insignificant findings. Perhaps it's time to start paying attention to what this research is telling us.

The Big Fade

Not long ago, a study by researchers at Vanderbilt University kicked off a minor firestorm in the staid world of educational research. The study analyzed Tennessee's pre-kindergarten program, utilizing both randomized assignment and observational components to assess how students performed after these programs, up until the third grade. The results were

discouraging: initial gains for pre-K students had not lasted – and in fact had largely faded out by the end of kindergarten.[26] Worse, students who had attended pre-K actually underperformed their peers who hadn't. The study immediately attracted critics, who argued that the Tennessee program was not truly "high quality" or that crossovers between the experimental group and the control group had spoiled the research. As the Vanderbilt study's authors, Dale C. Farran and Mark W. Lipsey, argued for the Brookings Institution, none of these criticisms were particularly meaningful. Yet the studies continued to attract an inordinate amount of negative attention.

Why the sensitivity to perceived slights of pre-K? Because that's where education policy types have stored all their hopes. One of the most consistent dynamics in education research lies in the greater plasticity of outcomes for the very young. That is, the younger the students studied, the more likely that interventions will have a statistically meaningful impact. Researchers and policy makers have invested a great deal in pre-K, both monetarily and in social and emotional terms, because they see such interventions as the last best hope for making real improvements. To challenge the effect of pre-K is to challenge the basic narrative of many people working in the education sector.

Unfortunately for defenders of the honor of pre-K and other early interventions, the Tennessee study is large, randomized, and high-quality, and backs up what we know from the third grade follow-up to the Head Start Impact Study, which found similarly discouraging outcomes.[27] There are a number of studies which find gains that persist, but they are universally

[26] Lipsey, Mark W., Dale C. Farran, and Kerry G. Hofer. "A Randomized Control Trial of a Statewide Voluntary Prekindergarten Program on Children's Skills and Behaviors through Third Grade. Research Report." Peabody Research Institute (2015).

[27] Puma, Mike, Stephen Bell, Ronna Cook, Camilla Heid, Pam Broene, Frank Jenkins, Andrew Mashburn, and Jason Downer. "Third Grade Follow-Up to the Head Start Impact Study: Final Report. OPRE Report 2012-45." Administration for Children & Families (2012).

older, smaller, and lower-quality than the two large, largely-negative studies. It's also unclear if the kind of intensive, small-group programs that are considered high-quality can ever be replicated at the scales required to truly make a difference in overall American schooling.

An image from a meta-analysis of 49 high-quality studies on the persistence of pre-K interventions over time shows this dynamic in striking fashion[28]:

Figure 1: Consistency seen in pre-K effect size over time[4]
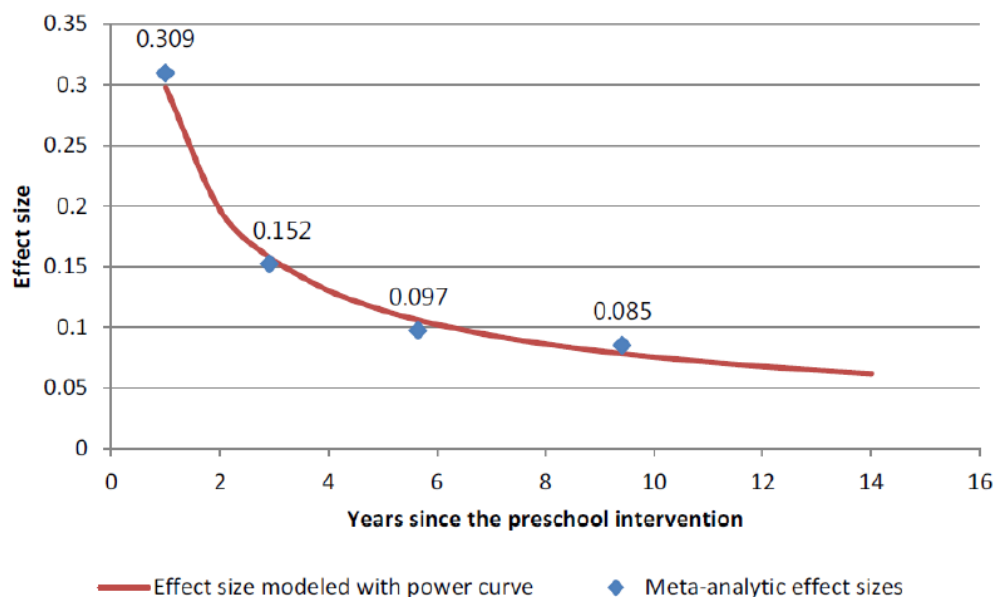
As can be seen, by middle school we're talking about effects of less than one tenth of a standard deviation. This, for the kinds of interventions into which many in our political and policy sphere have poured their hopes.

Does this mean that I'm opposed to funding universal pre-K? Not at all. In fact I'm a strong supporter of such programs. I support them, though, out of the conviction that society

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[28] Kay, N., & Pennucci, A. (2014). Early childhood education for low-income students: A review of the evidence and
benefit-cost analysis (Doc. No. 14-01-2201). Olympia: Washington State Institute for Public Policy.

should be helping parents by funding childcare and schooling from birth through college, not because I think they're the key to any particular quantitative educational outcomes. Providing universal pre-kindergarten programs enables parents to work and reduces or eliminates the exorbitant cost of child care. These types of assistance, and the general goal of providing children with safe and stimulating places to spend their time, are sufficient reason to fund pre-K. Justifications that depend on dubious claims of long-lasting educational gains leave such programs at constant risk. I'd rather defend good programs with sound moral justifications than through reference to dubious learning gains. Wouldn't you?

Why would this fadeout effect occur so often in the research literature? Recall that the environment can alter the degree to which a given behavioral trait is heritable. At an extreme, we have cases of children who are subject to truly terrible types of abuse and neglect. Such children, unsurprisingly, often struggle in various academic metrics. Their natural talents are undermined by their environment, so we can expect their underlying genetic gifts to be suppressed. Fadeout perhaps comes from a much less intense but similar dynamic happening at scale. Earlier in a child's life, their immediate environment is likely of the utmost importance. Their parents have a direct and major impact on them for most of their waking life. As time goes on, children become more and more independent, spending less and less time under the direct supervision of their parents and less and less time in their unique home environment. As time goes on, in other words, children are less subject to the ways that parents enrich – or fail to enrich – their cognitive skills. The impact of a parent struggling with poverty, drug abuse or alcoholism, or one who simply isn't providing the best environment for learning lessens as a child spends less and less time in that specific environment.

Another possibility is simply that programs like Head Start do provide precisely that, a Head Start, but that over a long enough time frame, peers who did not enroll in Head Start inevitably catch up, as differences in latent underlying ability assert themselves over time. The program, however high quality, can't possibly hold up against the difference in talent over time.

Either way, the fadeout effect is exactly what we'd expect to find, if we merely follow the evidence that shows profound genetic differences in individual academic ability.

The Arrow of Causation

A common complaint of liberal education reformers is that students who face consistent achievement gaps, such as poor minority students, suffer because they are systematically excluded from the best schools, screened out by high housing prices in these affluent, white districts. It's certainly true that zoning, often deliberately used to exclude poor people of color, plays an outsized role in the populations of public schools. Any progressive person should be in favor of tearing down these legal walls, and of reforming our education system

But think now about all we've said about selection effects and why they are so important. What if the conventional story confuses cause and effect? Isn't it more likely that we perceive those districts to be the best precisely because they effectively exclude students who suffer under the burdens of racial discrimination and poverty? Of course schools look good when, through geography and policy, they are responsible for educating only those students who receive the greatest socioeconomic advantages our society provides. As ugly as their motives are, and as much as we should oppose them, the rich people who use geography and zoning to exclude poor students of color from their school districts have understood a basic reality about schooling: outcomes are mostly a matter of who gets sorted in and who gets sorted out.

And these dynamics become self-perpetuating. As school districts gain a reputation for being high-quality because they've excluded harder-to-educate students, the higher the property values, which in turn exclude even more poorer students. For the record, I believe we need robust desegregation efforts to break this cycle, and to better integrate students from across the socioeconomic spectrum in our public schools. I just don't think that doing so will likely have much impact on quantitative educational metrics.

This reversal of perceived cause and effect seems quite obvious, yet the idea is almost entirely absent from education talk, in either liberal or conservative media. Why?

Enforcing Consensus: the Example of the Gates Foundation

There are many reasons that the simple fact of inherent talent differences so often goes unspoken in education policy circles. As I've suggested, both major ideological tendencies in American life have reason to avoid the topic. But there are basic dynamics of the policy funding mechanism that contribute to this problem, and there's no better example than the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation.

In grad school, I worked as a research assistant for the late Dr. Linda Bergmann, a brilliant academic and good friend who we lost far too early. The project involved an effort to create an online social network where students could practice their academic writing. I confess I didn't think much of the project itself, as it seemed to combine the worst kinds of ed-tech hype and a deep dorkiness that would prevent real teenagers from wanting to use it. But it was grad school, so I was broke, and I respected and admired Linda and was happy to work with her.

At the time I was working on the project, I was also keeping an eye on media reports about resistance to the Common Core. I was inspired, at the time, by the growing perception that

the Common Core was being forced from above, without proper vetting or public debate, and in a way that cut the most important stakeholders – parents and teachers – out of the loop. More, I was interested because of the influence of the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation on this sweeping, rapid adoption. Since I do educational and pedagogical research, and talk with ed researchers in person and online, the Gates Foundation is unavoidable. Their influence is everywhere, and many people worry about what that means for the future of American education.

Then, literally an hour or two after I had been reading up on this type of concern and criticism, Linda mentioned in passing that the money they were paying me was Gates Foundation money. I had been working for the foundation without even knowing it.

I should say from the outset: it is absolutely a good thing that they provide money for that research, and all the other research they fund. As a grad student whose financial situation got a little bit easier thanks to that funding, I felt personally grateful. And while it's essential to the integrity of any research that there be a firewall between the funders and the researchers themselves, I don't pretend that organizations that fund research have no legitimate interests in the direction of that research. Given the steady erosion of governmental support for academic research of all kinds, foundations and think tanks have become even more important as a source of research dollars.

But there's a certain size threshold beyond which that kind of influence can become something pernicious. With its incredible size, my fear is that the Gates Foundation long since crossed that threshold.

Consider reporting by *the Washington Post*'s Lyndsey Laton, on the way in which the Gates Foundation was able, with disturbing ease, to implement the Common Core throughout much of the country. Two points should be clear from that reporting. First, the evidence to support the claim that the Common Core will result in learning gains is thin on the ground. As the WaPo story reads,

> Tom Loveless, a former Harvard professor who is an education policy expert at the Brookings Institution, said the Common Core was "built on a shaky theory." He said he has found no correlation between quality standards and higher student achievement. "Everyone who developed standards in the past has had a theory that standards will raise achievement, and that's not happened," Loveless said.[29]

This is in keeping with a much broader divide between the rhetoric of education reform and the results of ed reform programs. So many of the boilerplate policy preferences of the ed reform movement, from charter schools to eliminating teacher unions to merit pay, have seen inconclusive or negative research results, and yet that never seems to pierce the elite conversation.

Layton:

> Jay P. Greene, head of the Department of Education Reform at the University of Arkansas, says the Gates Foundation's overall dominance in education policy has subtly muffled dissent. "Really rich guys can come up with ideas that they think are great, but there is a danger that everyone will tell them they're great, even if they're not," Greene said.

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[29] Layton, Lyndsey. "How Bill Gates pulled off the swift Common Core revolution." *The Washington Post* 7 (2014).

That problem would not be nearly as acute if not for the size and power of the Gates Foundation. That's true regardless of your interpretation of the benevolent intentions of that particular organization. Above a certain size, funders like the Gates Foundation become a problem even if the people running them have all the best intentions. I don't doubt for a second that Bill and Melinda Gates personally, and most of the people who work for the Foundation, intend only to do the best work they can with their money. But then, the history of the ed reform movement is a history of the failure of good intentions.

There's a palpable sense of worry among a lot of education researchers and people in the education nonprofit world, around the Gates Foundation. They're just so dominant in funding and, through funding, influence. That manifests itself in a fear of publicly criticizing the foundation and its policy preferences. That may be a small fear, it may represent itself subtly, but if you multiply it across the broad world of education research and policy, it can have a major impact on what gets studied, how results are reported, and what is considered realistic policy. It's easy to make this sound like some kind of explicit corruption, but it's not that simple or that easy to judge.

I've talk to many people in the education research world who will privately admit to this dynamic. It isn't a matter of people saying "I want that sweet Gates cash, I better get in line on charter schools." It's a matter of identifying what kind of research gets funded, of worrying about funding in the future, of recognizing that plummeting state and federal research dollars can make private foundations like Gates the only game in town. It's not sinister, on either side of the equation, but it can have pernicious effects.

There's also a question of access. Layton describes Gates becoming frustrated and angry when pressed on questions about how the Common Core was implemented. It seems strange to

me that he would grow flustered by what are very common concerns about the standards. But then I wonder: how often does he really encounter strong rebuttals to his own preferences in day-to-day life? There is a tendency for rich and powerful men to be surrounded by people who tell them what they want to hear.

And I think that's what I worry about most, when it comes to these people at the elite end of the policy spectrum. Are they hearing the kind of criticism of ed reform policy they desperately need to? Does Gates understand that the dominance of demographic factors in educational outcomes is one of the most powerful and consistent findings in the history of education research? Has he seen the research that undercuts claims of sweeping gains from charter schools or merit pay? Has Donald Trump? Has Betsey Devos? I doubt it.

I think that the commitment Bill and Melinda Gates have made to dispersing their immense fortune in charitable ways is remarkable and admirable, however strongly I feel that philanthropy is not a substitute for government intervention. There are some educational projects that have been spearheaded or funded by the Gates Foundation that I find very admirable. But there's also a set of policy preferences that they push that seem immune to evidence.

What kind of policy preferences? There is one set of stories about education and the workplace of tomorrow that stands above all others, and which has been relentlessly advanced by the think tank industrial complex: the supremacy of educational technology, learning to code, and the myth of the STEM shortage.

Chapter xx. The Modern Science of Heritability

To understand why not all individual students are created equal – and why that doesn't lead us to a more bigoted world – it's necessary to talk a long walk through the world of behavioral genetics, the academic field that concerns itself with how our genes do (and don't) influence our behavior. Though the basics of the arguments ahead stretch back to Charles Darwin, the field has made enormous strides in just the last few years, as new analytical techniques have opened up new levels of analysis to researchers. Understanding the state of the field requires a look at some research that's a little dry, but it's necessary to wade through it so that we can start to discuss the consequences of this new science of human potential.

It is worth saying at the outset that while I have expertise in the somewhat-related area of educational measurement, I am not a researcher in behavioral genetics, and I rely on the work of scholars in that field to understand the dynamics I'm about to discuss. The bibliography contains many resources written by experts that can give you greater depth on these issues.

Genotype and Phenotype, Genetic and Heritable

Before we look at the evidence for genetic influence on intelligence and other cognitive skills, it's important for us to define some terms. The first concept to understand before we begin is the difference between genotype and phenotype. Helpfully, the word "genotype" essentially explains itself: your genotype tells you what type of genes you have, more or less. Your genotype is your genetic code, the blueprint of you that's written into your DNA and which exists in all of your cells. The specific genetic information that makes you left-handed or fair-haired or more likely to have high blood pressure is encoded in your genotype. Your genotype

broadly defined is the entirety of your DNA sequences, but we sometimes refer to a specific genotype for a given trait – the blue-eyed genotype, the Tay-Sachs genotype, etc.

Your phenotype, in turn, is the actual expression of those genes in your characteristics. Your phenotype is the expression of your genotype but also of your environment and the events that have shaped you. Genotype thus dictates phenotype only to a degree. If you lose a finger in a work accident, that is a part of your phenotype that is not reflected in your genotype; if you were to clone you from your DNA, that clone would still have a full complement of fingers. Our genes encode us with broad tendencies and probabilities, but they are not destiny, as we'll learn.

We should also distinguish what is heritable and what is genetic. For a trait to be heritable in conventional terms, it must have significant variation across populations. The fact that most human beings are bipedal is genetic; our typical two-legged form is encoded in our DNA. But the trait cannot be said to be heritable because those without born two legs are very rare. Height, on the other hand, is heritable. There is a broad range of variation in heights, and biological parentage determines perhaps .80 of the variation in adults in modern societies with adequate nutrition and health care.[30]

Note that I said "in societies with adequate nutrition and health care." Height is in fact less heritable in poorer, developing nations than in richer countries. Why? Because the environment asserts itself more in the former countries than in the latter. In societies where food is scarcer and there is less adequate medical care, height is more likely to be influenced by nutrition and health. In a society where a higher percentage of people have access to a certain

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[30] Silventoinen, Karri, Jaakko Kaprio, Eero Lahelma, and Markku Koskenvuo. "Relative effect of genetic and environmental factors on body height: differences across birth cohorts among Finnish men and women." *American journal of public health* 90, no. 4 (2000): 627.

minimum of food and medical care, the environmental variance is equalized and genes assert themselves more forcefully. The heritability of a trait itself is therefore not necessarily static and can be influenced by interactions with the environment.

I want to underline one other implicit point above: when we talk about a degree of heritability, we're talking about *population* level variation. That is, if I tell you that, say, intelligence is 80% heritable by late adulthood, that does *not* mean that any individual person's genes dictated 80% of their height. Rather, it means that 80% of the variation in intelligence within a population is due to variation in that population's genes. There are obvious ways in which environmental effects can assert themselves at the individual level without changing the population-level heritability of a trait. If an individual person suffers a traumatic brain injury and has reduced cognitive capacity as a result, their intelligence will certainly not be 80% accounted for by their genes. But heritability is a function of populations, and so that extreme environmental variation will have no impact on the heritability of the underlying trait of intelligence.

Twin and Adoption Studies

So how do we know what we know about the heritability of cognitive traits like personality and intelligence? First, we know from two types of studies that take advantage of our understanding of biological parentage, twin studies and adoption studies, sometimes collectively referred to as kinship studies.

As you're likely aware, there are two types of twins, colloquially referred to as fraternal and identical. Fraternal twins are born when two sperms fertilize two eggs, and they are no more genetically similar than any other two siblings. Identical twins, on the other hand, arise when a single fertilized egg forms a zygote and splits into two embryos. That's why identical twins are

technically called monozygotic. As both twins arise from the same zygote, they share the same DNA.

Obviously, monozygotic twins aren't entirely *identical*. The environment and chance still shape them. It happens that two of my best friends are identical twins. They have always had significantly different builds, owing to complications in utero that left one twin undernourished at the time. And of course one twin can get a scar that the other won't have, one can get his heart broken while his brother won't, one will just get into the college of her choice while her sister will just get left out, etc. Another set of identical twins in my high school were champion runners, but one sister was just a bit better than the other, who herself was just a bit better than her sister academically. We live in a world of variation and little differences have major consequences in individual lives. But since we're interested in population-level trends, we can limit our concern here to the genetic similarity of identical twins.

Monozygotic twins permit us to study the impact of genetic parentage on a variety of traits, but there's an obvious confound: twins are usually reared together, in the same homes, by the same parent or parents. This wouldn't be much of an issue with traits that are merely genetic, like eye color or certain hereditary medical conditions. I doubt anyone thinks that parenting can turn a blue-eyed child's eyes green. But for cognitive traits like intelligence, it would seem that there's much more opportunity for parental influence. In order to study purely genetic effects, we'd have to study twins reared by different people and in different homes, and that's precisely what researchers do.

Obviously, there aren't huge numbers of such people, making collecting this data a work- and resource-intensive venture. Once data is collected, though, we're left with an intriguing possibility: if identical twins raised apart are exactly like each other on a given cognitive trait, it

would imply that the trait is purely genetic; if identical twins raised apart are entirely unalike each other on a given cognitive trait, it would imply that the trait is purely environmental. And any values in between could be used to assess what proportion of the (population level!) trait is genetic or environmental.

As I've said, there simply aren't a ton of known identical twins reared entirely apart and willing to be studied by researchers out there. For this reason, many studies have drawn from the same data sets, such as the Minnesota Twin Registry, which seeks to gather data from all of the twins born in that state over the course of several decades. The problem with so many researchers drawing from a limited pool of data is that any problems with that data would be replicated across different studies. Another approach for data collection was needed, and that took the form of adoption studies.

Adoption studies take advantage of adoption's tendency to bring the genetically dissimilar into a common environment. Adopted siblings share very similar environments, the home, but are usually no more genetically similar than two strangers. Therefore, looking at the similarities between adopted children and their siblings helps us to ascertain the degree of genetic influence on a trait. If the trait is highly correlated between adopted siblings, the trait could be reasonably assumed to be largely environmental; if the trait is not, it suggests more genetic influence. Similar inferences can be drawn from adopted children and parents. If the relationship between a parent's trait and an adopted child's trait is similar to that between a biological parent and child, it suggests more environmental influence.

You can think of a continuum of familial relations and genetic similarity which we can then use to study associations with given traits. Identical twins share all of their DNA. Non-

monozygotic siblings share less than that but more than cousins. Cousins share less than siblings but more than adopted siblings, who are no more similar than random strangers.

It's here that we have to pull this term "environmental" apart. As should be obvious, an awful lot is being contained by that word. Growing up in a home filled with books could be called an environmental variable, and so could breaking your leg at 7 years old, and so could exposure to lead paint, and so could being forced to take violin lessons. We can never fully enumerate all of the variability that's contained in the environment. What we can do, though, and what researchers have done for decades, is to divide the environment into two broad categories: the shared and unshared environments. These terms emerged most directly from twin studies, and can be most easily understood in that context: the shared environment is what the child of biological parents shares with an adopted sibling. This is the home, the parenting, typically the school, etc. Shared environment reflects those things that we most directly associate with child-rearing. The rest of the non-genetic variation – the individual events that shape our lives, the random moments, the people who work with one child but not the other, the peer groups and networks, etc. – is called the unshared environment. It's the portion of the variation in a given trait that is not consistent between siblings, and the kitchen sink into which much of the random stuff of life is thrown.

By convention, these are the three slices that behavioral geneticists divide the variability in cognitive traits into: the portion which is heritable through genetic parentage, the portion which is absorbed through the family or shared environment, and the portion which is based on the frequently-undefined unshared environment, the parts of a person's life which are neither familial nor genetic.

The Three Laws of Behavioral Genetics

So what do kinship studies tell us about the relationship between genetic heritage and cognitive traits? I will let an expert define the general tenor of the research from the last several decades. I turn to the behavioral geneticist Erik Turkheimer, who in 2000 defined the Three Laws of Behavioral Genetics. They are as follows:

- First Law. All human behavioral traits are heritable.

- Second Law. The effect of being raised in the same family is smaller than the effect of genes.

- Third Law. A substantial portion of the variation in complex human behavioral traits is not accounted for by the effects of genes or families.[31]

Calling these statements laws might strike some as overstepping, but Turkheimer saw them as essentially inarguable at the time, and was justified in doing so, as we'll see. But what exactly do the laws mean?

The First Law tells us that all "behavioral traits" are heritable. Take a moment to absorb the radicalism of that statement: behavioral traits are those aspects of the human condition related to our purposeful actions. The fact that we breathe, while genetic, is not heritable. But the fact that I might prefer vanilla to chocolate, my tendency to be studious or lazy, my introversion or extroversion, and yes, my intelligence – according to Turkheimer and his laws, all are heritable. Note, though, that the First Law states only that such behavioral traits are heritable. It

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[31] Turkheimer, Eric. "Three laws of behavior genetics and what they mean." *Current directions in psychological science* 9, no. 5 (2000): 160-164.

does not specify the degree of heritability, only that any measurable behavioral aspect of human life is, to one degree or another, heritable.

The Second Law establishes the relative weighting of that heritability. In a given measurable behavioral trait, the family effects – the shared environment, as described above – are less important than the impact of genetic parentage. This, too, has radical consequences that might not be immediately apparent. It means that all of the many things parents do to shape the personality and behavior of their children are likely an inefficient use of time and energy. That's not to say that these parenting choices don't matter – later I'll discuss when and how they matter – but it does mean that, when it comes to certain quantitative outcomes in behavioral traits, children are shaped predominately by nature, not nurture.

In fact, in the research literature the portion of variation attributable to the shared environment is, for most traits, very close to zero. Parenting, the family, and home life simply don't seem to matter much on a number of definable behavioral traits, including intelligence. This is a controversial observation, but one that was buttressed by a large amount of evidence, both before Turkheimer coined his Three Laws and since. Judith Harris's pioneering, fire-starting book *The Nurture Assumption* was the first real public salvo in this battle, though intelligence researchers had discussed it in their scholarly work for years.[32] The notion that, *for determining quantitative indicators of behavioral traits*, parenting and family environment matter very little is still controversial 20 years since the book's publication. But study after study has found the same thing: that the genetic influence on traits like intelligence dwarfs the

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[32] Harris, Judith Rich. *The nurture assumption: Why children turn out the way they do*. Simon and Schuster, 2011.

influence of the family, that the shared environment in fact contributes close to zero to observed variation in behavioral traits.

The Third Law is Turkheimer's nod to the unshared environment. It represents what former Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld would refer to as "known unknowns." There is a significant portion of the variation in any given behavioral trait that we simply can't consistently parse, a variation in environment and events that likely swings wildly from one person to another, even within families. These could include things like peer interactions, being assigned to one teacher or another, non-genetic medical conditions, the choices of the individual, the steady progression of random chance.

Weak vs. Strong

What the Three Laws add up to, in sum, is the "weak genetic explanation," defined by Turkheimer: "one way or another, genetic differences among people wind up correlated with phenotypic differences."[33] In other words, the more alike people are in their genes, the more alike they will tend to be in their selves – physically, yes, but also in terms of behavior. This is a statement that many people will take as uncontroversial, even obvious, and yet few really grasp its implications. It means that, while nature and nurture still both matter in their own ways, when it comes to predicting outcomes for real human beings, we should expect nature to win out on basically any given trait. That's a stance that's weighted with profound consequences for our species, and its implications have not been fully understood by most people.

An obvious question might arise here: if this is the weak explanation, what would the strong explanation be? Turkheimer defines it as "the discovery that an observed phenotypic

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[33] Turkheimer, Eric. "Weak genetic explanation 20 years later: Reply to Plomin et al.(2016)." Perspectives on Psychological *Science* 11, no. 1 (2016): 24.

difference is a manifestation of a specific latent genetic mechanism."[34] That is, the Strong Explanation would entail finding specific genetic "blueprints" for behavioral traits and observing the outcome in phenotypes of real human beings. The strong explanation, if achieved for many different traits, would lead to the *Gattaca*-style future that many people fear, where everyone's future would be (more or less) knowable via their genotype. This was one of the goals of the Human Genome Project, the search for "a gene for X" – the ability to look at genotypes and make very accurate predictions about phenotypes.

But with a few exceptions, this hasn't come true. Have we identified the elusive "gene for intelligence?" No, because no such genes exist. Rather, the evidence is overwhelming that intelligence and other behavioral traits are *polygenic* – that is, they are the product of many, many interactions between many, many different variations in genetic information. There are some traits in humans that have specific individual genetic triggers; Down syndrome, for example, is the result of an extra copy of a single chromosome. But the science of genetic variation in the 21st century has largely demonstrated that most human genetic variation is the result of many different aspects of one's genotype working in concert. In fact, researchers have recently posited a Fourth Law: "A typical human behavioral trait is associated with very many genetic variants, each of which accounts for a very small percentage of the behavioral variability."

Note that the polygenic nature of behavioral traits makes the strong explanation even less likely to emerge. The more relationships that matter, the more times the number of necessary

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[34] Ibid.

pieces of information are multiplied in a model, and the require computing power grows exponentially.

Not If Parenting Matters, But How It Matters

The notion that parents can control very little of the behavioral traits in their children – that parenting doesn't have much to do with personality – is consistently one of the most controversial elements of modern behavioral

In an interview with *The Guardian*, Pinker explained the continuing importance of parenting succinctly:

> The first reaction of everyone to such evidence was, he says, remarkable. "'So you are saying it doesn't matter how I treat my children?' Of course, it matters. Because parents have an enormous influence on the child's happiness and wellbeing. They may not turn them into one kind of person, but they can make their children very miserable…."

> Think of it this way, he says: you are not surprised to learn that you cannot change the personality of your spouse. "But you wouldn't respond by saying that it doesn't matter how I treat my spouse? Of course it matters how you treat your spouse. How you treat your spouse affects the quality of your relationship," he says. "If you are not nice to your children, they will remember that when

they grow up. So there are lots of reasons that parents should be loving.[35]

With this comparison, Pinker aptly demonstrates the weird presumption behind many reactions to the irrelevance of the shared environment: why should one's behavior only matter if it can be proven to change someone else's personality? We should strive to treat children well not because we think that they are a canvas onto which we can paint a personality, but because treating children well is a moral good in and of itself. Stable, healthy, and nurturing homes for children are a means, not an end. In general, this will be one of the most important lessons to be drawn from the modern study of heritability: rather than attempting to constantly change quantitative metrics which prove stubbornly resistant to that change, we should broaden our conception of what success means to include the humanistic values of care and compassion.

The (Not So) Gloomy Prospect

As we've seen, there is a portion of the variation in human behavioral traits that is undefined by either the family or the genome, typically called the unshared environment, and which has resisted systematic investigation by researchers. This was memorably described as "the gloomy prospect" by the researchers Robert Plomin and Denise Daniels, who complain that "the salient environment might be unsystematic, idiosyncratic, or serendipitous events such as accidents, illnesses, or other traumas."[36] Since these events are unsystematic, in other words, researchers like Plomin and Daniels may never be able to use them to make sufficiently predictive models. All human behavior models are stochastic, noise-laden; they question is whether that noise can be sufficiently controlled for to make predictions above a certain quality

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[35] Radford, Tim. "Have You Heard? It's in the Genes." *The Guardian*, September 25, 2002;

[36] Plomin, Robert, and Denise Daniels. "Why are children in the same family so different from one another?." *Behavioral and Brain Sciences* 10, no. 1 (1987): 1-16.

threshold. At the time of their writing in 1987, Plomin and Daniels were pessimistic, and though there have been vast advances made since then, in many traits the influence of unshared environment remains quite large.

Well, I would never begrudge other researchers their gloominess. But as a human being, I confess to being somewhat encouraged by the persistence of the unshared environment. It's within that uncontrolled variation – perhaps .20 of the variation in IQ, perhaps as much as .50 in GPA, and with great variation in a number of aspects of personality – that human autonomy can take place. Indeed, the pioneering intelligence researcher James Flynn's recent book *Does Your Family Make You Smarter?* takes precisely this uncontrolled variation as its subject, looking to it for a degree of choice and chance in human outcomes even while Flynn unwaveringly accepts that genes play the largest part. That persistence of a room for individual action and variation does not seem gloomy to me.

Critics and Skeptics

Kinship studies are not without their critics. To begin with, for these studies to work as intended, it's imperative that twins reared apart are truly reared apart. If the twins are raised partially together, it would jeopardize the inferences made based on the data set. How could it be that children are raised partially together? In the real world, familial relationships are not always as clear and uncomplicated as they may appear to be. Family members frequently come together and apart in real-world situations, and adoption can be a tangled process. (I myself am the product of a complex, largely unhappy joining-and-dividing of families.) The Minnesota Twin Study's data set has been criticized on these grounds. The psychologist Jay Joseph, a dogged

critic of twin studies, has argued that the data set is flawed because many of the included twins were in fact separated only after years of cohabitation, confounding analysis.[37]

Another common criticism is that, while twins may at times be reared entirely separately, they necessarily share a common prenatal environment, which we know has an impact on certain life outcomes. "[T]win studies fail to separate the effects of genes and the prenatal environment," writes the psychology professor Jefferson M. Fish. "This failure casts doubt on claims of the relative effects of genes and environment on intelligence."[38] A rather dyspeptic *Slate* essay from 2001 assailed the entire enterprise of twin studies, calling them "crude, potentially misleading, and based on an antiquated view of genetics."[39] Palmer argues that a dynamic in genetics known as copy-number variations results in systematic differences between monozygotic twins. Unfortunately for Palmer, he made a number of obvious errors and was forcefully rebutted by an open letter signed by a half-dozen eminent researchers in the relevant fields.[40] Most importantly, if copy-number variations *reduces* the genetic similarity between identical twins, if anything it suggests that genetic similarity is even more powerful, given the remarkable phenotypic similarity between such twins.

Though committed hereditarians can be rather strident, especially online, established researchers arguing for the power of genetic influence tend to be quite forthcoming about legitimate methodological issues. In the same article in which he coined the Three Laws, Turkheimer expresses the basic challenge succinctly:

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[37] Joseph, Jay. *The trouble with twin studies: A reassessment of twin research in the social and behavioral sciences*. Routledge, 2014.
[38] Fish, Jefferson M. "Why Twin Studies Don't Separate Genes and Environment." *Psychology Today,* 2010.
[39] Palmer, Brian. "Double Inanity." *Slate*, 2011.
[40] Segal, Nancy L. "The value of twin studies: A response to slate magazine/research reviews/twin news worth noting." *Twin Research and Human Genetics* 14, no. 6 (2011): 593.

Human developmental social science is difficult—equally so for the genetically and environmentally inclined—because of the (methodologically vexing, humanistically pleasing) confluence of two conditions: (a) Behavior emerges out of complex, nonlinear developmental processes, and (b) ethical considerations prevent us from bringing most human developmental processes under effective experimental control.

These dynamics, in part, account for the objections of the critics and the gloominess of those who would wish to assign all of human behavior to one variable or another. I am, as I have said, among those who draws humanistic pleasure from this fundamental unknowability, the portions of variance which are and will remain unexplained. But while the critics and skeptics are performing a valuable service, the remarkable consistency and statistical power of hundreds of twin and adoption studies represent a remarkably durable evidentiary basis, particularly in the context of the social sciences, where few results ever withstand replication. And now, thanks to modern genomics, we have even more evidence.

The Rise of the GWAS

Twin and adoption studies are, in a sense, looking at the shadow that genes cast rather than at the genes themselves. Their reliance on estimates from parentage limit just how certain we can be about the proportions of genetic parentage and shared and unshared environment in a given trait. But we are now reaching an era where direct analysis of DNA itself is much more pragmatic, and the consequences are potentially huge.

Not long ago, sequencing an individual's genome was a laborious and immensely expensive process. Today, for-profit companies offer personal genome sequencing for as little as $100, providing customers with information about their genetic ancestry and potentially their risks of certain diseases. There are issues with personal gene sequencing of this type, and plenty

of skeptics about their findings. But their mere existence tells us something about how ubiquitous and cheap DNA analysis has become.

For our purposes, what's really relevant is the rise of the Genome-Wide Association Study, or GWAS. As the name implies, a GWAS looks across a subject's DNA for specific variations, and associates that genome with a given attribute of the tested person. That genetic similarity is usually measured in terms of single nucleotide polymorphisms, or SNPs – pronounced "snips," pleasantly – for short. If you remember your high school biology, the alleles you discussed – the different forms of a given gene – are in fact determined by SNPs.

What this all means is that we can look for genetic similarity not only within a given family, which limits sample sizes and makes data collection harder, but between two strangers. If those who share more genetic similarity in terms of SNPs are also closer to each other in a given variable of interest, it lends evidence to the idea that the trait is significantly heritable. And that is exactly what we find with IQ: those who are closer genetically tend to be closer in intelligence. This provides important validating evidence for the heritability of intelligence, helping to address some of the concerns with twin and adoption studies mentioned above. For years, skeptics have argued that the inability to directly compare differences in the genetic code to differences in studied attributes undermined our confidence in kinship study results. And I think this criticism was warranted and a good example of the interplay that makes science work.

Today, the results from just the kind of study skeptics have asked for have come back in, and the results seem clear. A major study utilizing a data set of thousands of test subjects revealed 52 variations in genotype that were associated with differences in intelligence.[41] The

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[41] Zimmer, Carl. "In 'Enormous Success,' Scientists Tie 52 Genes to Human Intelligence." *The New York Times*, May 22 2017.

actual effect sizes of the identified variations are tiny, accounting for fractions of IQ points. This lends further evidence to the notion that intelligence is a polygenetic trait, with probably thousands upon thousands of variations contributing to observed differences in phenotype, and makes it even less likely that we will have a genetic test for (a predisposition towards) intelligence anytime soon. But the mere existence of statistically significant relationships between genotype and intelligent lends powerful validating evidence to kinship studies.

In light of this study and others like them, Turkheimer, Richard Nisbett, and Paige Harden argued in an essay for Vox that "the heritability of intelligence is no longer scientifically contentious."[42] The consequences of the relationship between biological parentage and intelligence are worth arguing about. The policy prescriptions that we might make are debatable. But debating whether intelligence and similar cognitive traits are at all heritable is no longer a worthwhile proposition.

"IQ Tests Don't Mean Anything"

A common rejoinder to discussions of the heritability of cognitive traits like intelligence is that, whatever the relationship between genetic parentage and those traits, this discussion is useless because tests of intelligence don't tell us anything. This claim is also pleasant but false. IQ tests measure real things, persistent aspects of individuals that can be used to make valid inferences about abilities and outcomes. There are certainly those who exaggerate both their predictive power and the breadth of what they measure. But there is no credible argument that IQ tests are not powerfully predictive of a host of human variables, especially ones that pertain to academic outcomes.

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[42] cite

In order to discuss the strengths (and weaknesses) of IQ testing and its analogs, it's necessary to lay out a little basic social science theory.

First, in testing theory we often talk about *constructs*. Constructs are variables or traits of interest. We call them constructs to acknowledge that ideas like "reading ability" or "intelligence" or "persuasiveness" are not directly measurable in the way that temperature or length is. We have to make decisions about how to measure these things in a way that a researcher measuring weight or distance simply doesn't. The term "construct" reflects an awareness that there are choices being made here, that reasonable people might not agree about the best way to measure these variables.

The way that we do ultimately decide to measure a construct is referred to be the clunky term *operationalization.* We operationalize by choosing a particular specific way to measure the construct. So, for example, the SAT's multiple choice exam can be seen as an operationalization of the construct college readiness. When a doctor asks you to rate your pain on a scale of 1-10, she is asking operationalizing the construct of subjective pain experience through that scale. We cannot directly measure intelligence in the same way we measure body weight, even in the mind of the most ardent IQ advocate. Instead, we operationalize the construct of intelligence through various tests.

How do we know if our tests are legitimate? How do we know the operationalization matches the construct? Primarily through examining validity and reliability.

Validity refers broadly to the sense that a test's criteria of interest is actually effectively represented by that test. Or, more simply, the traditional definition that validity refers to the degree that *a test measures what it purports to measure*. That is, a language test's validity tells us

if it provides quality information on the degree to which a given test taker has mastered a language. A medical test's validity depends on its ability to accurately diagnose a given ailment. And an intelligence test's validity refers to its ability to sort more intelligent people from less. Strictly speaking, validity is a vector, not a destination; we can say that a test has more or less validity, but never that a test is perfectly valid.

(Some sticklers will insist that tests themselves are not valid or invalid, but rather test *scores* are valid or invalid. For our purposes we can leave this attitude aside.)

A second major concern of testing theory is *reliability*. Reliability refers broadly to the consistency of a test and its mechanisms. A test is reliable if it measures the construct the same way for different people at different times. If a test mechanism is culturally biased against (or in favor of) a particular group, that would be a failure of reliability. If an exam is given in a room that is quiet for those taking it in the mornings but noisy for those taking it in the afternoon, that would challenge the reliability of that exam. Reliability is a necessary but insufficient quality of a valid exam; an exam can be invalid but reliable (measuring a given construct invalidly but consistently), but an unreliable exam can never be valid.

Progressives often advance the notion that intelligence testing and its analogs are invalid, but they rarely point to quality research to buttress those claims. In fact, the validity of IQ tests and similar intellectual aptitude tests has been studied again and again, and as David Hambrick and Christopher Chabris argued in a *Slate* essay, "we know as well as anything we know in psychology that IQ predicts many different measures of success."[43] That is not merely hyperbole:

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[43] Hambrick, D. Z., and C. Chabris. "Yes, IQ really matters: Critics of the SAT and other standardized testing are disregarding the data." *Slate* (2014).

given the field's now-notorious replication problems, the validity of intelligence testing stands as one of the most robust findings in psychology.

To pick one example, IQ testing has been validated not only by predicting academic performance but by predicting ability at work, where IQ has been found to correlate strongly with both the level of someone's position and their competence in that position.[44]

Critics of intelligence testing often claim that such tests are tautological. IQ tests and IQ test proxies like the SAT, this thinking goes, only tell us how well a given student does on such tests. Take a 2014 *New Yorker* article by Elizabeth Kolbert. In it, Kolbert advances the typical nostrums about the SAT, concluding her piece by writing, "As befits an exam named for itself, the SAT measures those skills—and really only those skills—necessary for the SATs."[45]

Kolbert writes, "How do you know how good a school is? Well, by the SAT scores of the students it accepts." I don't, in fact, think that most people judge a university by its average SAT scores, but never mind that. This claim is a common critique of the SAT and similar exams: that the validation process of these tests is tautological, as the means through which we validate those tests is other tests that measure similar constructs. Well, it's certainly true that tests are often validated *in part* through reference to other tests. This is what we call convergent validity in testing theory. But we bother to check the convergent validity of a new exam, in test development, because the older exam has been validated through other means.

How? For one, through correlating the test scores of those who have already taken the test with their college outcomes. If the purpose of SAT and ACT exams is to place students into

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[44] Schmidt, Frank L., and John Hunter. "General mental ability in the world of work: occupational attainment and job performance." *Journal of personality and social psychology* 86, no. 1 (2004): 162.
[45] Kolbert, Elizabeth. "Big Score: When Mom Takes the SATs." *The New Yorker* (2014).

colleges where they can succeed, then the most obvious way to ensure they're working correctly is by seeing if students who score better graduate at higher rates and get better grades than those who score worse. Over and over again, in study after study, this is exactly what we find: that the SAT and ACT accurately predict first year GPA, last year GPA, and graduation rates.[46]

What about reliability? Here, again, the tests perform well. One way to check a test's reliability is through a test-retest model. Because we intend tests to measure some stable construct in a given test taker, we would hope that individual test takers would score about the same on the instrument. In research performed with 104 nursing students, the Shipley-Institute of Living Scale (and IQ test) was strongly correlated across repeated tests, at 2 weeks, 1 month, 2 months, 3 months, and 4 months.[47] And some of the variation is explained by the fact that test takers were consistently performing a bit better on the instrument, which is precisely what we'd hope to find of students in a formal higher education program.

I choose this research as just one example out of many successful attempts to demonstrate the reliability of tests of general intelligence. The SAT and ACT also enjoy strong test-retest reliability as well, much to the chagrin of students retaking the tests. Indeed, even sending repeat SAT takers a copy of their first test, with their answers and an answer key, did very little to change scores.[48] The SAT's reliability is rock solid.

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[46] See, for example, Schmitt, Neal, Jessica Keeney, Frederick L. Oswald, Timothy J. Pleskac, Abigail Q. Billington, Ruchi Sinha, and Mark Zorzie. "Prediction of 4-year college student performance using cognitive and noncognitive predictors and the impact on demographic status of admitted students." *Journal of Applied Psychology* 94, no. 6 (2009): 1479.

[47] Goodman, John T., David L. Streiner, and Christel A. Woodward. "Test-retest reliability of the Shipley-Institute of Living Scale: Practice effects or random variation." *Psychological Reports* 35, no. 1 (1974): 351-354.

[48] Stricker, Lawrence J. "Test disclosure and retest performance on the scholastic aptitude test." The College Board (1982).

Criticism of the validity and reliability of these tests frustrates me in part because it is a classic example of attacking strength instead of weakness. There are all manner of ethical, political, and social critiques that can be made about the tests that are used in college admissions, for example. These complaints are often valid and worth hearing. But the critiques that really sting are the ones about how the tests are *used* not about their validity and reliability. Attempting to attack these tests on their validity and reliability, on the technical dimensions of test design, is asking to fight a losing battle.

There are consistency issues here, as well. Progressive rejection of the validity of testing does not extend equally to all forms of tests. Consider language testing. As an applied linguist who has worked with many non-native English speakers in an academic context, I have seen the importance of effective language testing first hand. The difference between a valid and an invalid test of English as a second language can mean the difference between a student showing up utterly unprepared to survive in an American college and that student being screened out of that context, which in the long run is good for both the student and the college alike. Tests like the TOEFL, while imperfect, are thus essential, particularly given the sky-high tuition and fees that international students must often pay. Very few of my progressive friends harbor a rejection of the merits of language testing or find it immoral to administer them. Yet many reject IQ testing at first blush.

But why? The procedures through which a language test is developed, validated, measured for reliability, administered, and checked for continued functioning are virtually the same as in intelligence testing. The experts behind test development are often the same. The consequences for the TOEFL or IELTs exam are quite similar to those of the SAT and the ACT, in that they can mean the difference between entry into a competitive college or university – or

even a job. And much like the college entrance exams and similar IQ proxies, these tests are well validated and subject to rigorous quality controls. Adopting a degree of skepticism about testing theory and practice only when doing so fits a narrow vision of what's in our own political interest ultimately sets us up for failure.

Neither Everything Nor Nothing

This book project arose, largely, out of frustration – frustration with how these issues are debated in the public sphere, and in particular how attitudes tend to fall into several broad camps, neither of which are correct. On the one hand, you have the ardent hereditarians who reduce all of human life to the outcome of genes, and who are often incorrigibly racist. On the other hand, you have well-meaning but misguided people who dismiss the importance of genetics out of hand, who associate any discussion of the heritability of behavioral traits with the worst elements of eugenics and colonialism, and who make grandiose claims about a scientific literature they have never read. This simply leaves us unable to argue honestly and persuasively when we need to most.

Turkheimer, Harden, and Nisbett make the case eloquently:

> The left has another lesson to learn as well. If people with progressive political values, who reject claims of genetic determinism and pseudoscientific racialist speculation, abdicate their responsibility to engage with the science of human abilities and the genetics of human behavior, the field will come to be dominated by those who do not share those values. Liberals need not deny that intelligence is a real thing or that IQ tests measure something real about intelligence, that individuals and groups differ in measured IQ, or that individual differences are heritable in complex ways.

It's for this reason, ultimately, that I write this book. Every time a progressive person says, with the best of intentions, that children are blank slates onto which parents and the environment paint a personality, they are disarming themselves in a fight that has very high stakes indeed.

How to wage that fight, then, if everything I've said in this chapter is true? How to oppose those who claim that African Americans are unintelligent or that women are bad at math, while acknowledging the reality of individual heritability of behavioral traits? That's the subject of our next chapter.

No Justice, No Peace, No Progress: How Elites Ate the Social Justice Movement

Fredrik deBoer

Overview

I live in South Slope, Brooklyn. Living on the south side of the border with Park Slope proper helps keep the rent a little lower but does not, I'm afraid, make living here cool; Park Slope is immensely pleasant but existentially uncool, a realm for those who have grown a little too old to care about being cool. (People like me.) That sort of studied lack of style has a habit of spilling out into its nearest neighbors. But living so close does mean that I can easily wander through the neighborhood and observe its iconography.

Park Slope is a quintessentially liberal neighborhood in a quintessentially liberal borough of a quintessentially liberal city. The name itself is a code word, frequently used to refer to the moneyed and progressive, to liberal Democrats who embody a certain ideal of cosmopolitan urbanism, to the kind of left-leaning helicopter parents who give their children names that were popular 200 years ago. The stereotypical residents are bourgie progressive brownstone-dwellers, affluent multiracial families where the dad's an architect and the mom's in PR, and both refer to themselves on LinkedIn as "creatives." The local storefronts reflect a bohemian but anxious worldview, with stores that sell nothing but cheese or paper sitting alongside innumerable tutoring centers and places where your kid can learn to build a robot, to develop those STEM chops. Park Slope reminds you that no one worries more about climbing the ladder than those who have already reached rare altitude. People talk about the small-town feel, which is especially accessible to those whose jobs never pull them away from their laptop and can thus work from home. Trendy eateries come and go, while the windows of the realtor offices cheerily welcome any new residents who can pay the mid-seven-figure sales prices. Sadly, for the rents to get any

closer to affordable, you'd have to build taller buildings, and that would jeopardize that small town feel. So the brownstone crowd mostly fight to make sure that never happens.

And, of course, there are the signs. Faded signs from the Hillary Clinton 2016 campaign still stubbornly persist in a handful of places, and live somewhat awkwardly next to those celebrating Bernie Sanders and his revolution. There are some remaining examples of the classic "In this house, we believe" signs, the multicolored, multifonted and frequently-parodied lists of banal beliefs that supposedly hold liberal America together. There are pandemic-related signs thanking essential workers and insisting on the preeminence of science, defined however is momentarily politically convenient. And there are BlackLivesMatter signs, everywhere, rightfully insisting on the pervasiveness of racial inequality in American life, and demanding justice, though the form and measure of that demand remains unclear. So many BLM signs, yellowing in the sun. Dues-paying members of the Democratic Socialists of America scratch out the rent and send their kids to the daycares that dot the neighborhood. In all of this, Park Slope is emblematic of all number of other liberal spaces in the country – Lincoln Park in Chicago, Silver Lake in Los Angeles, Austin in Texas, the tony suburbs of Boston, innumerable college towns from coast to coast. These are the left-leaning enclaves of America, and they wear their insignia proudly.

You might, however, note something a little strange. These liberal enclaves are affluent enclaves. The streets that are festooned with BLM signs are predominantly white. Few of these socialists have ever worked the kind of jobs Eugene Debs would have recognized as an honest vocation. The foot soldiers of this would-be revolution are almost exclusively college educated. These bourgie liberals are joined in their support by the huge corporations they work for, by our military and intelligence services, by all the staid and typically apolitical institutions that constitute the backbone of American public life. Investment banks and agribusiness decorate

their websites with images of their diverse workforces, purple-haired apparatchiks smiling broad smiles for corporations that run and ruin the world. A popular Congresswoman attends a luxurious gala, maskless during a pandemic, her dress reading "Tax the Rich" as she beams for the cameras while her masked aides help her to maneuver through the hobnobbing hordes. Students at elite universities pay $70,000 a year to attend, knowing full well that in time the degree will pay itself back in spades, granting access not so much to better education as to the right kind of people, those who will build the shining cities on a hill of tomorrow, and as they do so they scream for an end to the entire system of Western civilization that has brought them to this elevated station.

All of which might prompt the question: how did it come to be that the language of liberation and the rage of the oppressed are not just accepted in the halls of power, but demanded, celebrated, financially supported, and socially mandated? When exactly did the rage of the disenfranchised become so trendy among the enfranchised? How can movements that purport to speak for the downtrodden find such easy adoption within the very institutions that are so often the targets of those movements and their critique? Why is a movement for Black lives, meant to shake white people out of their complacency and challenge their stranglehold on power, so enthusiastically and easily adopted by those same white people, or at least the affluent and educated among them?

This proposed book suggests an answer: because these were always elitist movements to begin with. Though many of their aims are salutary and their critiques true, these "movements" were dreamt up in dorm rooms and coffee shops, on Twitter and in faculty lounges, not on breadlines, in union halls, or in the streets. And while many of the individual members among them come from marginalized groups, *within* such groups prominent members are often from the upwardly-

mobile castes, if not already affluent. We may have a movement for all Black lives, and poor Black people suffer especially under our legal justice system, but it's a real if uncomfortable fact that the movement is overwhelmingly guided by the most highly-educated and connected portion of Black America. #MeToo started as a hashtag, and there is a degree of populism in any trending topic. But from the very beginning, the voices that were heard that emerged from that movement were wealthy, powerful, and famous. The Bernie Sanders movement attracted a lot of cash-strapped young people, but many of them would go on to salaries commensurate with their education, and the standard-bearers who have carried Bernie's message into the Biden administration come from elite altitudes.

This condition is not new; the concept of an educated revolutionary vanguard that seeks to rally the slumbering masses is as old as the concept of left and right. Friedrich Engels was the wealthy son of an industrialist; Fidel Castro was a lawyer and Che Guevara, a doctor. But whatever the utility of an elite leadership for populist movements, it cannot be denied that today there is a profound coziness between the elite and those who ostensibly stand against them. While most or all of the activists and foot soldiers for these movements would call corporations endorsing left social movements opportunists and frauds, the appropriation of their message continues. And the lack of a coherent policy agenda like that pursued by the abolition and Civil Rights movements empowers reactionary forces to funnel all of this populist rage into slogans, symbols, and feelings. These institutions, it turns out, are opportunistic and adaptable.

And thus we asked for fundamental change, and we got Goldman Sachs diversity pledges instead, rainbow flags flapping in the wind in front of defense company headquarters.

To see the general in the particular, we might consider the Good White Men, who is something like the avatar of this larger problem.

I don't really have to describe them. You already know who I mean; they walk among us. They are the self-identified white male allies, those talking over you to tell you that they want to help lift your voice, the ones who dominate the conversation as they tell other white men not to "take up space." They ostentatiously beat their breasts for justice and are always ready to rattle off a list of all the ways they benefit from privilege themselves. They are the ones who raise their hands politely at the Q&A at an academic conference, say "Please, teach us how not to oppress you," voices quivering, then get handsy at the mixer a few hours later. They are America's army of good white men, striding around chic neighborhoods in Warby Parkers and shirts that read "This is What a Feminist Looks Like." They haunt coffee shops, graduate seminars, and coworking spaces. Their tasteful messenger bags carry KN95 masks in bold colors, wireless earbuds, and copies of Gloria Anzaldua's *Borderlands*. They like craft beer but complain about its "bro culture"; they bike and take public transit due to climate change concerns, but it's their destiny to someday buy a Subaru. They work in all manner of fields, marketing and software development and HR and charitable foundations and (especially) academia and media. They are proud of their newly Invisaligned teeth, their tastefully decorated apartments, their pronouns in their bios, and the endlessly dry Twitter feeds from which they skewer Joe Rogan and neoliberals. They would never dream of being sexually aggressive, but they really think you should come upstairs to check out their vinyl.

They are an easy class to parody. It happens, though, that they are correct about a great many things. The existence and intensity of racism, sexism, and transphobia; the need for an assertive political agenda to address them; the inadequacy of the contemporary Democratic party as a

vehicle to achieve such change; the moral need to create a society that is more just, equitable, and comforting for everyone. These are goals that I share with them, and I imagine you share them, too. The trouble is not in the broadest aims of their project but in the way that they prosecute it and, worse, how the latter undermines the former. For in their paternalistic desire to save those who they perceive as needing saving, they cultivate an environment in which those very people are increasingly seen as helpless children, unable to fend for themselves, and in the execution of that will to save, they fill the room with their paradoxical good white maleness even as they seek to absolve themselves for it. Worst and most tangibly, the good white men are a microcosm of a far broader and more destructive problem: the way that the entire movement functions, by accident but inevitably, as a vehicle for the social and professional ambitions of the already empowered, the already comfortable.

People in the broad world of social justice - the political spaces dedicated to eradicating racism and sexism and all manner of demographic bigotry – are fond of saying "the Age of White Men is over." And perhaps it is. So ironic, then, and so cruel, but also so funny, that it seems that it will be followed by the Age of the Good White Men.

We are living, the story goes, in an unprecedented era of political foment, the era of social justice. Not that social justice has been achieved; far from it. We are frequently reminded that our culture remains uniquely racist, sexist, transphobic, and unequal. But now a new caste of warrior activists have arrived on the scene, and they have shaken our society to its core, demanding recognition from all manner of businesses, institutions, and public figures. BlackLivesMatter rhetoric informs sensitivity trainings for defense contractors, stodgy Wall Street cultures are upended by conduct codes written in light of the MeToo movement, and risk-

averse politicians jockey to align themselves with those who call for turning the whole system upside-down. One can hardly exist online without running into a declaration that our society is crippled by injustice and that all right-thinking people must participate in remaking it. Most of our celebrities, intellectuals, and institutions have, at least nominally, taken up this call. It would seem to be a moment of great ferment for those who demand progressive change.

Yet something feels amiss. For one, society has trudged along remarkably undisturbed in the midst of all this furor. Even during an unprecedented global pandemic, the essential American system – neoliberal capitalism, rigged meritocracy, declining unipolarity and American exceptionalism – has puttered on largely untroubled. What genuine threats to the current order seem to exist stem from places that have no connection to the social justice movement, such as climate change, the aforementioned virus, or the ambitions of China. At the margins, in our culture's most liberal spaces – academia, media, most of the nonprofit and think tank world, certain corners of Hollywood – there has been a doubling down on the purity norms and show trials that have been common to those spaces for a long time. The level of ambient fear in such places, fear of the social and professional costs of stepping out of line with the conventional political orthodoxy, seems to only grow and grow. Democratic politicians feel compelled to at least give lip service to the young, leftist wing of the party, with the 2020 Democratic presidential primary campaign frequently amounting to a competition between the candidates to see who could market themselves as the most progressive.

But to what end? That primary was won by Joe Biden, the Senator from the credit card industry and the candidate marketed as the least "woke." In the midst of all of this upheaval and demands for change, he sold himself as the candidate who would get things back to normal, who would set the country back to the same solid ground that activists denounced as a horror show of inequality

and racist violence. Worse, he won thanks to the votes of the working class Black voters that many within the broad social justice movement would think of as their natural constituency – but who in large majorities reject radical police reform and other of the preferred policies of activists. During an immensely consequential primary within America's liberal party, at a moment when that party had moved meaningfully left for the first time in a generation, the moderate won, and he did it with precisely the kind of racially and economically diverse coalition our social justice set yearns to organize.

Billions of dollars poured into various charities and political groups, earmarked for BlackLivesMatter, but preciously little of it seems to have landed in the hands of ordinary Black people. The language codes and exacting social norms of liberal spaces have not done much to transform the day-to-day experience of life for people from marginalized groups. Celebrities put #BLM in their Instagram bios, Netflix beats the bushes to find comedians of color for their specials, and the educated mind their Ps and Qs a little closer, but no major national civil rights or police reform legislation has passed, and there is no clear policy platform that's been proposed or adopted by advocacy groups. Normies who work at Geico know the terms BIPOC and Afrolatinx, but Black people still get profiled when it's time to apply for a mortgage. We are approaching a half-decade of #MeToo, but while a sexist joke can end a prominent career among the poor and working class domestic violence remains endemic. Socialism has been trendy for at least a decade, but while software developers may rage against capitalism, they still retire to tasteful Palo Alto dwellings that sit on lots zoned in such a way to make lower housing prices impossible. Overeducated progressives pile into their jobs at nonprofits where they receive DEI trainings that speak of the need to respect oppressed voices, while the institutions that employ them pour precious little of their donated, untaxed revenues back into the communities they

ostensibly fight for. Meanwhile, Republican electoral dominance in the next half-decade or more seems almost inevitable.

What happened? What went wrong? With BlackLivesMatter, yes, but also with #MeToo, with Stop Asian Hate, with Occupy Wall Street, with the socialist movement that rallied around Bernie Sanders, with the whole sprawling quilt of movements demanding change? *No Justice, No Peace, No Progress* offers an answer: that the positive force these movements were marshalling was eaten by elites, that all of the momentum for change that seemed to be growing was dispersed out to suit the needs of untold millions of the affluent, the educated, the connected, and the cool. It's tempting to say that the moment was coopted by elites, stolen by elites, misled by elites. But the truth is that the human infrastructure of the movements agitating for change themselves was always made up of the most educated and affluent slices of our society. Hidden beneath the rhetoric of the oppressed and the symbolism of the downtrodden lay the inconvenient fact that those doing the organizing, messaging, protesting, and campaigning were dominantly drawn from this country's more upwardly-mobile educated classes. And this was true despite the fact that the oppressions of race and sex and gender identity afflicted many members of these movements, made up as they were of women and Black and Hispanic people and trans people and others. Because the reality is that the activist classes of any given demographic slice, including the most marginalized, are overwhelmingly drawn from competitive colleges, enviable careers, and high social esteem. And among our most overbearingly woke, loud and proud advocates for social justice hides an army of white men, performing their politics on the national stage, receiving credit and professional success for decrying themselves, asking for an end to white male power and in so doing accruing it. They are the perfect symbol of a broader

condition, the sad reality of a movement for the worst off that works by and for the interests of those who need the help the least.

I grew up in communist household and come from a lineage of socialist activists. I was raised on the campus of one of the country's most liberal and politically-active college campuses. I have been an in-real-life activist since I was a teenager. I have spent most of my adult life in academia as a student, a teacher, and an administrator. And I have been a professional commentator on America's political and cultural battles for almost 15 years. In *No Justice, No Peace, No Progress* I will describe how, with no conservative malfeseance or government trickery, social justice practices and principles were taken over by the moneyed and the powerful. I'll detail the myriad ways elites take over social movements, and the pernicious effects such takeovers have. And I'll lay out an alternative vision for how our society's winners can contribute to social movements without taking them over, and how activists and their organizations can become more resilient to the undue influence of elites, nonprofits, corporations, and the Democratic party.

I might even find it within me to forgive those good white men, if only we can all work together to achieve real, tangible change in the world, and not just exchange symbols and slogans. I am, after all, a white man who would like to be good. I am an affluent socialist. I am a white person who would like to contribute to a more just and equitable world. I am an elite, after all, and like all anti-elite manifestos this one will be an act of self-criticism. We cannot advance the cause of social justice by practicing even more exclusion. We must build a more inclusive, welcoming, and friendly movement, one where people feel free to fail. This book will be my effort, however marginal, to contribute to such a movement.

Author

I'm a writer and academic who's been a prolific blogger and freelancer for almost 15 years. As a freelancer, I've been published in some of the biggest magazines and newspapers in the world. In print, my work has appeared in *The New York Times Magazine*, *Harper's*, *The Los Angeles Times*, and *The Washington Post*, among others. Online, my work has appeared at places like *Politico*, *Playboy*, *The New Republic*, *Foreign Policy*, *n+1*, *Jacobin*, among many others. My first book, *The Cult of Smart*, was published by St. Martin's Press in 2020. My self-titled Substack is one of the most widely-read and best-earning across the platform. I hold a PhD in English from Purdue University, where I focused in writing assessment and educational policy. I live in Brooklyn with my girlfriend and my cat.

Audience and Promotion

I'm in a strong position to promote this book. Unlike during the initial promotional period of my first book, I now have the advantage of a captive and organic audience through my Substack newsletter, one of the ten most successful in Substack's competitive Culture category. I have almost 20,000 readers on my mailing list, about 4,000 of whom have paid to subscribe. My work there is regularly discussed in major publications and is often tweeted by high-follower accounts. I have many friends within the world of professional political and cultural writing, and I could easily find willing readers to discuss and potentially blurb the book. I have also recently returned to high-profile freelance writing. I was published in the *Washington Post* in late 2020, in the *New York Times* in late 2021, and *the Daily Beast* in 2022. All of these freelancing opportunities increase the visibility of myself and my writing. I also am a very frequent guest on podcasts and radio, having more than 50 such appearances to my name. I have also appeared on *Breaking Points,* the Hill's *Rising* program, and Al-Jazeera America.

The book's major argument is provocative, particularly among those who produce much of our cultural and political analysis. The topics could hardly be more contemporary, as issues of social justice and the continuing quest to achieve it are a daily subject for our chattering class. And while I am skeptical of the way that liberals and leftists pursue progressive change in practice, I also deeply believe in the fundamental values of equality, diversity, and progress, which may help make the book's message more intriguing and marketable. I genuinely believe that there are a lot of people – good, progressive people committed to fostering equality and justice – who think something has gone badly wrong with 21st century American liberalism, who look at all the overheated rhetoric and endless ratcheting up of emotion and notice that it has amounted to just about nothing. This book is for them, and I think there are far more of them than we know.

Also, I'm very handsome.

Manuscript

Anticipated Length: 150 - 200 pages

Anticipated Completion Date: Six months from proposal acceptance

Chapter Outline

Chapter One: Whatever Happened to 2020?

In 2020, while a pandemic raged, the country saw a ripple of political discontent the likes of which it had not seen in decades. Trapped in their homes by lockdowns, wracked with anxiety by the seemingly inexorable spread of a deadly virus, and experiencing the final months of one of the most controversial presidential administrations in history, Americans were ready to explode, waiting only for a spark. That spark arrived, tragically and unmistakably, in the form of the video of a horrific police murder of an unarmed Black man in Minneapolis. The killing of George Floyd galvanized an already-wounded nation, driving tens of thousands into the streets to protest and igniting a series of riots that, if nothing else, expressed rage and heartbreak over yet-more racial injustice. In response, seemingly the entire country rose up and demanded change. The usual suspects within liberal politics and media cried out, unsurprisingly, but so did seemingly every major corporation and nonprofit, including institutions in the corporate and political worlds that are used to staying resolutely apolitical. Even some Republican politicians felt compelled to condemn Floyd's death. This fervor for racial justice intersected with simmering demands for change such as those of the #MeToo movement and the burgeoning socialist impulse in American politics. At times it seemed that the entire country roared for social justice in one voice.

Then nothing much changed.

This chapter will consider what happened in 2020 and the year that followed, what didn't, and why. I'll try to define what exactly changed as a result of this spasm of political anger and explore why more and deeper change wasn't achieved. I'll discuss the difference between

awareness and action, the political utility of support that's enforced through social pressure rather than organic conviction, and whether institutions like investment banks and partisan thinktanks can ever really contribute to positive political change. I'll articulate the real, enduring value of the 2020 moment, discuss why so little has changed, and detail how things could have been different and still could be in the future.

Chapter Two: Anatomy of a Good White Man

Political correctness, identity politics, social justice warrior, woke – all of these terms have been contested, rejected, and ridiculed, and yet everyone knows what they mean. These are terms that have been used to refer to a certain strain of contemporary progressivism, a type of liberal politics that fixates on historical justice towards marginal groups, equality and inequality between groups, and disparate impacts of various forms of treatment towards them, especially as concerns language and symbolism. I have called these "social justice politics" in the past, as this seems like the least inflammatory term. Social justice politics entails a great deal of reference to group identities and dynamics, but fundamentally fixates on the individual, insisting that the individual's experience of the world (and, inevitably, their sense of offense) is the lens through which politics must be understood. The combination of a collectivist desire for social equality and an individualist definition of injustice inevitably results in an assumed hierarchy of suffering, one typically explicitly denied but obvious to everyone involved: some people have more privilege, some have none, and the ones who have the most have to take it on the chin in the name of justice and equality. Given the difficulty of actually uprooting the material advantage enjoyed by many white men, this usually takes the form of vague social embarrassment, memes about male disposability, and a general perception that white men are to be of low priority. And thus we have the conundrum of the Good White Man.

The Good White Man was made inevitable by the very political conditions that have inspired those innumerable jokes at the expense of white men. Since contemporary liberal politics made performative denigration of white men an essential element of in-group belonging in progressive spaces, the very targets of that performative denigration felt compelled to take part in it. And, because of the obvious cognitive dissonance at play, these Good White Men would have to tell *more* jokes about "white dudes," louder than anyone else. There is a profound desperation to the behavior of the white man who routinely grouses publicly about white men; he has something to prove to his audience and to himself. But by standing as an exception to all of his own critiques, even if he routinely flagellates himself, he cannot help but dull the political message he ostensibly embraces. In this chapter I'll discuss this unhealthy phenomenon, point out some clear examples from politics and culture, and detail what makes this all so self-defeating, as well as so cringey. And I'll lay out how white men actually can function as effective allies without engaging in histrionics about their white male guilt or showboating their virtue.

Chapter Three: BPMCLM, or How the Black Professional-Managerial Class Commandeered Civil Rights

The struggle to free Black Americans from the socioeconomic, legal, and environmental conditions under which they still labor is perhaps the most essential throughline of American history. From slavery to the Civil War and abolition, from Reconstruction to Jim Crow, and from the Civil Rights movement to BlackLivesMatter, the unconscionable treatment of Black people and their dogged efforts to rise above it are the quintessential American story. Yet precisely because this story is so central and so emotionally-loaded, an unfortunate tendency has developed in our national conversation about it: seeing African-Americans as a monolith, talking

about a unitary Black experience, and minimizing the very real internal divisions that have attended the effort for racial liberation throughout our history.

In 2020, many progressives rallied around the cause of "defunding the police," a vague demand that sometimes meant minor changes to how police budgets were divvied up and sometimes meant the abolition of police departments in their entirety. Despite this confusion and the radicalism of the demand – or perhaps because of them – defunding the police became the most prominent demand associated with BlackLivesMatter and, by extension, the 2020 political moment. But there was a curious omission from all of this attention: the opinion of the median Black American. Our media and our conversation talked of "Black opinion," but this was almost invariably a reflection of the opinions of a few thousand Black activists who were younger, more educated, and vastly more left-wing than the Black mainstream. In time, poll after poll would show that Black Americans rejected defunding the police in large majorities, and often favored greater police presence in their neighborhoods. These findings were often presented as surprising or counterintuitive, but they in fact were perfectly predictable, given that opinion polling has for decades found that Black Americans are predominantly moderates, and function as the most conservative element of the traditional Democratic coalition. The notion of a radical consensus within Black America was a mirage, and the Black PMC – professional managerial class – was its source. In this chapter I will discuss the tendency for the social justice movement to believe that any given group is represented by the most radical 5% of that group, and detail the consequences for Black Americans specifically and marginalized groups generally.

Chapter Four: The Nonprofit Industrial Complex

Nonprofit organizations attract donations, tax breaks, and résumés from some of our brightest and most idealistic young people. In many issues, such as in fighting climate change, they are the backbone of political organizing, outreach, and education. They play a huge role in shaping the direction of the Democratic party, its policies and its politics. They are one of the main conduits through which the liberal donor class influences the national conversation.

They are also frequently exploitative organizations, essentially tax shelters for the wealthy and influence-peddling consortiums for the connected. Many of them spend a scandalously low amount of donated money on their core missions, instead dispersing it to executives within the organizations in the form of lavish salaries. Their tax-dodging abilities rob the public coffers of funds that could be utilized in far better ways by government action than through the dubious mechanisms of unaccountable institutions. They are simultaneously too conservative and too radical, often pushing inflammatory messaging into progressive spheres while functioning as a check on positive change through their ability to dictate strategy in a way that protects the interests of their wealthy donors. And many of them function almost identically to for-profit companies, raking in tax-free dollars, fixating on growing their endowments, and always pushing to expand their footprint even when the needs of their constituents might be better served by remaining small and cheap. In this chapter I'll break down the nonprofit industrial complex, discuss a little of its history, show how it's an impediment to progress, and detail a possible future where these institutions are forced to return to the original intent of nonprofit organization or to dissolve.

Chapter Five: Why is Class First?

Abstract philosophies of politics can only succeed if they're married to specific and actionable strategies and tactics, material techniques designed to gain power and use it effectively. Today's social justice movements have proven themselves profoundly lacking in this regard, unable to take advantage of a very sympathetic media environment, hundreds of thousands of potential supporters, and a vast treasure trove of donated money. Rather than focusing on developing a specific set of political and policy goals, with an eye to achieving concrete material changes in our society, these movements have mostly dined out on loud-but-directionless protest movements, positive media coverage, and empty symbolism and sloganeering. Real change for real suffering people will require a different approach.

That better approach harkens back to the heyday of left politics in American history, drawing people together under the banner of poverty, economic need, and labor relations. Today, these principles are often denounced as "class-first leftism," under the assumption that such an organizing philosophy must necessarily minimize the interests of Black people, women, trans people, and other traditionally-oppressed groups. But this is a profound misconception. Organizing people via appeals to similar needs rather than demographic difference does not entail ignoring the very real injustices done to specific groups. Instead, this philosophy of politics fronts these identity-based inequalities and oppressions and stresses that, because of them, only truly collective action can win. Black activists need not pretend that their specific pain is not real, or less important than the pain of poverty, to rally under our banner. They need only understand that all manner of people must work together to end that injustice. And a distinct set of messaging tactics emerges from this approach: describing discrete real-world problems that real people face, with a minimum of jargon or theory, and articulating how a better future is possible

through specific and realistic programs that could be implemented with some political progress at the local, state, and national level. Because partisan politicians love abstraction, which allows them to hide behind vague words and empty symbols, they embrace the current discourse of social justice. In its place we must create a left-wing culture of specificity and concrete demands, inviting questions of our politicians of what exactly they will do for us, when, and how. This is the how-to portion of the book, the specific program it recommends.

Chapter Six: To Fight for Everyone

This chapter turns from the preceding chapter's focus on the how of broad-based progressive politics to the why, from efficacy to ethics. Call it demographic neutrality, or moral universalism, or whatever else you wish – the idea that left-wing organizing and progressive politics should work for the betterment of all, rather than fixate on redressing the historical grievances of specific groups, has grown profoundly unpopular. Those who advocate "color blindness" as race policy are seen as deluded at best and handmaidens of racism at worst. We are told that certain groups must be put first, "centered," allowed to "hold space," for us to fight against political oppression. Those who argue that we should organize on the basis of socioeconomic class, bringing together disparate demographic groups under the banner of shared material need, are derided as self-interested members of the overclass and seen as guilty of minimizing or ignoring the plight of racial minorities. The notion that people of all colors, genders, and sexual orientations can mutually benefit from a society that protects the least of us is regarded as a relic of a less-enlightened past, a vestige of movements long gone by and little mourned.

But as I hope to have proven in this book, in fact it is today's habit of slicing the suffering up into thinner and thinner slices and arranging them on a ladder of suffering that is an insult to oppressed people. For the forces that seek to keep the rich and powerful rich and powerful, at the

expense of all of us, cannot possibly be confronted by a fractured movement. They can only be defeated by a unified campaign that operates under the banner of all of the people. The current scenario, where the emotional stakes are high and the rhetoric extreme but the results few and far between, is a perfectly predictable consequence of telling a large portion of your potential political foot soldiers that their problems are not really problems, and their issues not really a priority. It will take all of us defeat establishment power, and we can't rally people to our cause if we don't make them see how fighting alongside us is in their self-interest.

But more, the politics of exclusion, the practice of defining certain demographic groups as the natural beneficiaries of progressive action to the exclusion of others, makes the Good White Man problem inevitable. As the preceding chapters will show, the inherent social, professional, and political incentives created by modern social justice politics pushes privileged people to adopt themselves into the role of the oppressed. This is annoying on a personal level, but in a deeper sense genuinely undermines the work of liberatory movements. Since any demographic identity contains within it both the powerful and the powerless, the obsessive focus on these demographic features enables the dishonest and the opportunistic to muddy the waters about what injustice is, who is suffering under it, and what it will take to redress that injustice. Goldman Sachs diversity statements and defense contractors calling for radical police reform can only happen in a certain kind of society, operating under a certain vision of progress. I want to articulate that better vision, one that does more for more people, all while recognizing the reality of racism, sexism, and transphobia and our pressing moral need to fight them. A better world is possible, but the current social justice movement cannot achieve it, and I aim to show readers a better way.

Sample Chapter

Why is Class First?

There's an insult I've heard for most of my political life, going all the way back to my beginnings as a teenaged activists, but one which became more and more common in the years that have followed the 2016 Democratic primary between Hillary Clinton and Bernie Sanders. It's a term that would be alien to the vast majority of ordinary people and is usually confined to internecine squabbles among the left-leaning, and yet it refers to debates that have real political stakes. In a progressive discourse increasingly fixated on categorizing others into tiers of righteousness, it's an insult that suggests cluelessness, ignorance, and casual racism: *class-first leftist*.

The term is a pejorative, and has been used to imply a failure to properly "center" minority identity narratives, a privileged myopia about the source of real injustice. A class-first leftist puts class first, which is to say, identifies socioeconomic need and poverty as the locus of progressive organizing. What's wrong with that, you might ask, given that left-leaning politicians and activists have emphasized dollars-and-cents issues for centuries? What's wrong with it, according to some, is that to put class first is to put race, sex, gender identity, disability, and similar concerns second. To be a class-first leftist, in this telling, is to fail to be *intersectional*, and there are few more damning criticisms than that among twenty-first century leftists.

During that 2016 primary, Clinton and Sanders came to be seen not just as representatives of two competing wings of the Democratic party, but as archetypes for fundamental questions facing American progressivism. For her part, Clinton worked relentlessly to establish her credibility as an opponent of racism, sexism, and homophobia, and her coming victory (assumed by many,

including me, to be in the bag) was represented as a towering victory for feminism. To rally voters to these causes is of course a noble effort, and given the demographics of the Democratic party's base, a political necessity. But Clinton's campaign also embodied the excesses and self-parodic elements of this kind of naked appeal to demographic diversity. An indicative tweet from the official campaign Twitter account contained a notoriously bewildering diagram which purported to show how all of the world's various bigotries and oppressions interact with each other; stung by repeated criticisms about her coziness with the finance industry, she groused that breaking up the big banks would not end racism, almost a caricature of the tendency of identity politics to shield the moneyed and powerful from its critiques. Clinton had spent a life hobnobbing with the wealthy and powerful, including her opponent Donald Trump, and was now lecturing the rest of us on standing with the marginalized.

Despite Clinton's clumsy messaging, the Sanders campaign appeared to be legitimately hampered by the insistence that the candidate was insufficiently focused on identity issues. He was dogged by such accusations throughout the primary, and though it's difficult to say how much he was hurt by this narrative, an antagonistic liberal media ran with it, motivated as much by clicks as by the legitimacy of the critique. A high-profile incident where several Black women activists interrupted one of his events to complain of his supposed inattentiveness to racial issues played right into the hands of Sanders's many opponents within the press. His every press release was meticulously picked over by Clinton fans, including her many supporters in media – indeed, it frequently felt as though the supposedly unbiased news media *was* Clinton's base – and any inartful language was declared to be evidence of a profoundly unenlightened mindset. As I was a Sanders supporter myself, it will not surprise you to learn that I found the complaints to be baseless and motivated by cynical political motives. But it is the case that they became part of

the communal understanding of the entire Sanders movement, and it's also the case that, whether the class-first accusation was effective or not, the campaign ultimately floundered in large part because of its inability to make inroads with the Black moderates that many see as the heart of the Democratic coalition.

In the 2020 campaign, Sanders would make a conspicuous effort to better court Black Democrats, but to little avail. While exit polling showed that he retained a strong showing among Hispanic and Asian voters, and dominated with the youth vote, his inability to attract Black voters only grew, and ultimately his 2020 campaign appeared to have fared worse than his 2016 bid.

For many, Sanders's failures proved the salience of the class-first critique. The insult would be used often in the years that followed, directed at the Democratic Socialists of America, the "Dirtbag Left" constellation of podcasters and writers, and the left flank of American politics in general. The message from the identitarian left has been simple: class-first politics are not just offensive but a political detriment, as a class-first message will never rally the natural constituencies of the left, meaning various minority groups. But I think that story is wrong. I think, in fact, that if we take those various oppressions seriously, the only way to confront them is with a class-first approach to organizing, as emphasizing socioeconomic issues is the only way for a progressive movement to win. And I think a class-first philosophy for left-wing movements ultimately foregrounds, rather than sidelines, traditional oppressions of minority groups. This chapter will make that case.

Class Focused, Not Class Reductionist

To understand why an orientation towards socioeconomic class is the best hope for progressive change, it's essential to distinguish a class-first leftist from another term which, I'm sorry to say, is often used interchangeably: *class reductionist*. The class reductionist is the leftist who not only highlights class, seeing class as the major organizing principle of progressive politics, but also thinks that racism and sexism and homophobia and associated ills *are* class problems. The class reductionist is the guy who says "it's not about race," who thinks that, for example, the oppression of Black Americans can be boiled down to their lower average incomes and wealth, or that high-profile police shootings are sparked by economic inequalities alone, rather than the confluence of poverty and race. The class reductionist believes that effective progressive organizing involves minimizing or ignoring racism, sexism, etc., under the dubious logic that those identity issues will necessarily prove divisive and serve as distractions from coming together to fight the bosses, the corporations, and the wealthy.

Adolph Reed summarized the class reductionist critique, in the process of criticizing those who make it, as

Class reductionism is the supposed view that inequalities apparently attributable to race, gender, or other categories of group identification are either secondary in importance or reducible to generic economic inequality. It thus follows, according to those who hurl the charge, that specifically anti-racist, feminist, or LGBTQ concerns, for example, should be dissolved within demands for economic redistribution.

This is a cogent summary, with Reed's typical incisiveness. The *New Republic* essay this quote is drawn from is titled "The Myth of Class Reductionism." Reed's argument in that piece is

correct, in the main, but while I would love to say that the class reductionist is fully a strawman, that he's a figment of the identitarian imagination, it wouldn't really be true. In a lifetime in left spaces I've met all kinds of people, including some who misguidedly think that effectively reaching across social classes involves minimizing the role of identity categories. I am thinking, in particular, of some misguided Marxists I know, all of them older, as well as a few figures from the labor movement. I can say, however, that this stance is thankfully rare, and Reed's larger point - "the class reductionist canard is a bid to shut down debate" – is almost always correct. Like so many other boogiemen in left discourse, the class reductionist exists for the rhetorical convenience of those who would shove all of their enemies into the same box. Thus disqualified, the floor is ceded to those who want to fixate on every human distinction but the economic. What's frustrating is that those who complain of class reductionism insist on their own unduly-constrictive perspective on the source of our problems even as they complain about the same failing in others. Once the class reductionist is invoked, Reed writes, "you may safely dismiss your opponents as wild-eyed fomenters of discord without addressing the substance of their disagreements with you on policy proposals."

The reference to policy proposals is key. A common critique of identity politics (a term, I will remind you, that I use with some misgivings) is that they typically fail to coalesce into specific, material goals, instead tending to result in vague recriminations and assertions of personal bigotries that do not leave us with a clear path of what to organize for and how to fight for it. As I discussed in a previous chapter, this lack of specific policy aims was a major problem for the 2020 "uprising," ensuring that the immense outpouring of public support had no particular place to go. The class reductionist could be forgiven for looking at the empty sloganeering that so often attends identity-based politics and concluding that such politics are inherently unserious.

The trouble is that class politics are not inherently any more serious or strategic. After all, Occupy Wall Street and the broader milieu of post-financial crisis activism was relentlessly class-focused and yet suffered from a similar lack of structure and demands – the famous refusal of Occupy leaders to craft a set of demands, the inability to move beyond an inchoate and emotive set of complaints like "shit is fucked up and bullshit."

The broader issue, put simply, is that racism and sexism and homophobia really are unique and uniquely pernicious, they can be lessened but not erased through economic means, and members of disadvantaged groups have every right to expect their particular issues to be given significant weight by a broader liberatory movement. We must be class focused without being class fixated, which is precisely why it's so essential to distinguish class-first politics from class reductionism.

One salient difference between class-first and class reductionist is that some people (like me) willingly claim the mantle of the former, while no one professes to be the latter. "The label 'class reductionist' is frequently thrown around on the left today," Asad Haider wrote in Salon.com in 2020, at the height of the "Great Awokening," "but as was once true of the word 'hipster,' it doesn't appear to be a label anyone willingly accepts." Like the hipster, the class reductionist is a creature that seems to exist only in the abstract, a clumsy approximation of some real dynamics that draws in so many people who are guilty of the charge that the term becomes, functionally, a slur. Haider goes on to point out, as I have, that a seemingly abstract debate was given teeth in the 2016 Democratic primary. Haider's essay is cogent, but he demonstrates a common tic in these debates: in a likely bid to appear reasonable, several times he asserts that class reductionism is real and a genuine problem, without citing any specific figures or quotes. I have already conceded that there are some out class reductionism is not an entirely mythical phenomenon. But this tendency to refer generally to class reductionism as a problem without

defining who precisely is guilty of it and how many of them there are simply helps those who use the critique insincerely for their own political ends.

Yes, it's possible for any of us to become so focused on issues of monetary and economic inequality that we fail to give adequate consideration to oppressions of race, gender, sexual orientation, and disability. But there are two things I feel I must point out. The first is that we decide what we're focused on as a movement, what the horizons of our particular project are, and if we are responsible and speak and act with care there is absolutely no reason that we would have to become myopic in our understanding of injustice. More, I simply cannot look out at the current state of the American left-of-center and conclude that the problem is insufficient focus on racial or gender issues. Liberal discourse in the 2020s is absolutely obsessive about these dynamics; there is no reason to fear that we will suddenly forget them.

Common Cause, or Not

If we recognize that there is a danger of becoming too fixated on class, however small, we should also recognize that there are great opportunities in using class as the central organizing vehicle for progressive politics. Among other advantages, class issues are universal, where identity politics are by their very nature limited and exclusionary.

What too often goes undiscussed in left spaces in the social justice era is this: while the act of dividing the left's constituencies into smaller and smaller identity niches might be fine for academic analysis, it's ruinous for taking action. Ruinous because the smaller and smaller you slice humanity into groups, the less power those groups have, whether that be the power of votes, of organizing, or of educating the masses. As the socialist historian Eric Hobsbawm wrote, "winning majorities is not the same as adding up minorities." Ordinary people join political

movements when they feel they have common cause, which is to say, shared self-interest. They naturally ask "what's in it for me?"

That might sound crude or selfish, like Ayn Rand's political philosophy of Objectivism, but it's only a simple statement of how most people interact with the world. (And as it happens, radical left traditions such as Marxism have always accepted the preeminence of self-interest.) For our movements to fixate relentlessly on markers of difference rather than shared needs is to undercut the most basic appeal the left has: that what's good for some of us is what's good for all of us. These dangers of identity fixation are particularly pernicious given the identitarian left's current obsession with "centering," with putting certain groups first, giving them preferential position as the most important elements of our coalition. This kind of showy philosophy of the greater priority of the most oppressed may be easily adopted by the numerically tiny number of college-educated liberals who now dominate our political discursive spaces, but will never attract the masses, who like all of us spend most of their days wondering how to care for themselves and their families.

That is not, of course, to say that we shouldn't consider combatting racism or sexism or homophobia to be special priorities. Of course they must be, if we are to pursue real justice. But it's one thing to recognize them as distinct and unique problems, and to understand the profound evil they represent, and another to tell those from outside any one of those particular groups that their problems are therefore not problems. The messaging tweaks that ensure that we maintain the former while avoiding the latter are not complicated. But the left-of-center must contend with a self-inflicted wound, which is endless, incessant fights over whether any individual is adequately prioritizing those who are seen as the most oppressed.

There is nothing wrong with maintaining identity groups within part of a broader coalition. But those groups themselves are inevitably defined not by a shared struggle to achieve specific goals but by a kind of victim insiderism. What's more, a coalition that is made up of these smaller identity groups will always be at war with itself, as the specific groups jockey for position and demand outsized deference from other members. This can clearly be seen with the advent of "affinity groups," which are found on college campuses and in activist circles but also increasingly within corporate structures. And these groups have proven time and again to produce angst and division rather than unity. I myself have seen the damage that they can do on several occasions, as the demand that a specific slice of a coalition be prioritized above others results in infighting, recrimination, and understandable resentment from those who have been told that their needs are not a priority.

Putting the demands of small groups within larger movements ahead of the good of the movement itself can have real-world negative impact. In 2019, a New York-based chapter of DSA planned to canvass in the city for Medicare for All. This would seem to be a very natural combination of tactics and messaging for a socialist organization; Medicare for All has emerged as the signature left-wing policy demand of the post-Sanders-candidacy left, and door knocking to spread the word about a candidate or issue has long been a core tactic of left activist groups. But this simple plan to do outreach for a vital issue was torpedoed when members of DSA's disability caucus caught wind of the plan. New York has many walkups, that is, apartment buildings without elevators. These loud voices within DSA (mostly on Twitter) demanded to know what accommodation the organizers of the canvassing event would make in the event that a wheelchair-bound member wanted to participate. (To my knowledge such a person remained theoretical throughout the controversy.) The organizers of the canvassing event of course could

do nothing to accommodate such members; it's unfortunate that so many of New York's apartment buildings are older and do not have an elevator, but changing that would be beyond the power of any group. You might hope that this simple logic would win the day, but it was not to be. These members (who defined themselves, it seems, as part of the disability caucus ahead of being members of the larger group) caused such a loud and angry ordeal on social media that the plan to canvass was quietly scrapped, and dozens or hundreds of potential supporters of Medicare for all went unreached.

This is a perfect encapsulation of the problem with "put us first" politics; sometimes, for a movement to flourish, the movement itself must be prioritized above its constituent parts. A coalition that is driven first and foremost by the demands of the individual fiefdoms within it is a marriage of convenience, and like all such marriages it will break down when the going gets tough. And the tragedy lies in the self-defeating nature of this dynamics. The demand to make accommodations for the disabled is righteous, but if a disability "affinity group" sabotages its larger organizing vehicle, they will never be empowered to actually affect positive change for disabled people or anyone else. The fundamental question is whether the specific identity groups work to serve a broader movement for justice that can potentially give those groups what they want when empowered, or whether the arrow points in the other direction and the identity groups glom onto the broader movement only in the hopes of leveraging their own needs and desires. The latter cannot be a winning political strategy, as the cacophony of conflicting demands will always resulted in incoherent political action and failure.

It's also fair to note that, precisely because the critiques of feminism and civil rights and related schools of thought are correct, these groups cannot hope to achieve the desired change without ceding control to a larger group. That is to say that, yes, women are systematically

disempowered in our society; yes, Black people receive political representation that is less than what they should proportionally receive; yes, trans people are a tiny and vulnerable population – and for these exact reasons, the only hope for these groups is to work within a broader coalition to appeal to the masses and grow its people power.

And, yes, this may very well include sublimating the short-term desire for recognition and emotional coddling to the long-term (and far more meaningful) goal of winning power and, having done so, adopting the policies the members of these groups want. This is particularly important when it comes to matters of race, as a large corpus of political science demonstrates that when a particular political demand is embedded in a message of racial justice, that demand becomes less popular than when it is framed in other terms. Reflecting on the tendency within American liberalism to use racial framing when arguing for programs that are good for everyone (such as raising the minimum wage or clean air legislation), Marc Novicoff wrote in 2021 that

the premise of this style of argument seems to be that there are lots of people who are skeptical of race-neutral social welfare programs who will become more enthusiastic about them when the policies are framed as winners for racial equity…. [But] data clearly supports that this framing is counterproductive — almost everyone who cares a lot about racial justice also supports an expanded welfare state, whereas *lots* of people who support progressive economic policies have conservative views on racial justice questions.

It's of course lamentable that many American voters see racial framing as a turnoff, but that it's lamentable doesn't change the fact that it's true. And it's essential to see the alternatives presented: if we minimize divisive racial messaging and in so doing win support for policies that ultimately help racial minorities, we've achieved the material goal; if we emphasize race in our messaging and lose voters in the process, we may sound righteous, but we accomplish nothing.

It's worth asking what historical examples we have of identity-first groups succeeding in changing the world; they appear to be thin on the ground. (Part of the issue is that progressives have such a fundamentally pessimistic take on identity issues these days that they don't want to acknowledge any victories at all, which means they can rarely speak of the efficacy of their own preferred approach!) In contrast class-conscious narratives have worked frequently in the past. The American Civil Rights movement of the 20th century was of course first and foremost a movement for racial justice, and a fantastically successful one. But it's key to note that it was neither exclusively fixated on racial issues nor exclusionary of people who were not Black. The Civil Rights movement was in fact deeply invested in economic dimensions of human rights and justice, based on the correct assumption that Black Americans could not be truly liberated until they were freed from the bondage of wage slavery and poverty. The famous March on Washington where Martin Luther King gave his famous "I Have a Dream" speech was in fact fully titled the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom; King's last major political efforts before his assassination were the Poor People's Campaign and lending support to striking public workers in Memphis, Tennessee. King never wavered from a clear commitment to economic justice, nor saw it as separable from racial justice.

Nor did he ever shy away from reaching out to others who were not Black, throughout his career insisting on the need for racial reconciliation and forging connections with leaders and groups from other races. The tensions between King and Malcolm X have long since been adopted as symbols of radicalism vs. reform or integration vs. separatism, but the also surely represent a divide between effectiveness and impotence. The mainline Civil Rights movement King represented was instrumental in the Civil Rights Act, the Voting Rights Act, and many other tangible victories; X's Nation of Islam shunned electoral politics or any other paths to real

power, mostly serving as a vehicle for the enrichment of Elijah Muhammad and his inner circle, and collapsed into conspiracism and violence.

It's difficult even to see examples of where identity-based groups have effectively motivated even the broader population of people within the named groups. "Without outside compulsion or pressure," Hobsbawm writes, "under normal circumstances [identity politics] hardly ever mobilizes more than a minority…. Attempts to form separate political women's parties have not been very effective ways of mobilizing the women's vote." As extensively discussed in a previous chapter, BlackLivesMatter cannot fairly claim to represent the interests of most Black Americans, who opinion polls show to be in large majorities far more moderate than the activist group. Results from questions about defunding the police, the closest thing to a policy demand that arose from the 2020 protests, are even more stark: most Black voters want greater police presence in their communities, not less.

And so we see that organizing around identity groups cannot possibly succeed, as minority groups suffer from a lack of money, power, and influence, and those that would attempt to speak for such groups never even fully convince those communities to come onboard themselves. Basing a broad and multidimensional movement for social justice around the needs of specific demographics – which is to say, based on those needs as defined by the loudest members among them, which is often very far from the actual average opinion – does the Devil's work for him. If those loud voices win, they are in effect leveraging their oppressed status for selfish ends; if they fail, they risk isolating the very groups for which they speak.

Those who practice identity politics (who rarely claim the term themselves) are quick to point out that the right-wing also practices identity politics. And they're quite right. Indeed, in the 2020s the right seems to have little else than identity politics, having sidelined its traditional

emphasis on the Christian identity of the United States in favor of a politics of pure resentment, disdaining one imagined identity (the stereotypical "woke" liberal, overeducated, sanctimonious, hypocritical, and ignorant) and lionizing another (the all-American, the proudly provincial, the gun-toting, flag-waving defender of traditional values). As liberals have been pointing out for decades, "white rural patriotic Christian" *is* an identity, no less so than any of those progressives champion, and the fact that those who hold that identity imagine themselves to simply function as the default is precisely what members of disadvantaged groups must organize against. Certainly the identity politics charge indicts the right-wing, too.

The trouble is that, while this is a clever rejoinder, it doesn't change the underlying political context, and that context is one in which the right is better able to utilize identity politics than the left. The first reason for this is a matter of bare math: though the United States has been diversifying steadily over the past century, 70% of the electorate remains white, and the inherent undemocratic aspects of the Electoral College and Senate further this advantage. The country has been growing steadily more college-educated over time, and the college educated are heavily left-leaning, but it remains the case that less than 40% of American adults has a college degree. Most worryingly at all, the assumption that a browner United States is necessarily a more liberal United States has recently come into question. Among others, Ruy Texeira, a political scientist who was one of the first to predict that growing racial diversity in the United States would lead to an enduring Democratic majority, sounded the alarm after the 2020 election and pointed out that Hispanic and Asian voters were not following the script. (Even Black men broke towards Trump in greater numbers in 2020 than they had in 2016, though the overall number of Black Trump voters remained small.) What all of this means is that if liberals are playing identity politics with smaller and smaller niches, thanks to their obsession with standing with the

marginalized, and conservatives are playing identity politics with white voters without college degrees, the basic electoral math doesn't look great for Democrats.

But the problem is deeper. A large element of the left's intellectual and philosophical development of the past century has been to attack traditional grand narratives like "the American way" or the Enlightenment project or the superiority of a rights-based vision of human flourishing. And it's not difficult to see why a movement focused on securing the rights of oppressed groups might adopt such cynicism about these narratives: they have conspicuously failed to defend the rights of minorities even when they embrace such a defense in the abstract. The trouble is that you have to have something to rally people around, an idea, a symbol, a code, and the left has proven consistently incapable of coalescing around such a vision. This is *especially* problematic if you have already divided up your coalition into an endless number of identity groups and put them on a hierarchy of suffering. The contemporary left-of-center essentially tells potential converts that they are only the demographic groups they belong to and that these groups define their politics (despite, to pick a salient example, the rise of the Hispanic Republican), and that the larger ideals and institutions that we might sacrifice for are merely fictions told by power. Left-leaning people and groups don't want to appeal to patriotism or capitalism or the American way, and I certainly include myself in that distaste as well. But they also want to constantly fixate on difference rather than shared need, leaving them without a clear sense of what to appeal to when addressing the American people, perhaps except for the abstraction of social justice. It's a mess.

If conservatives can continue to base their fundamental message around God, country, and traditional ways of life, even as their worship of Trump functions as a repudiation of such traditionalism, how can the left rally its many distinct parts together to win power and achieve

social change? Through class, of course, through the universalizing power of class politics and the plain truth that the interests of the moneyed few are antagonistic towards those of the rest of us.

We Really Are In This Together

Writing in *Jacobin*, frequently referred to as America's premiere socialist journal, Paul Heidemann wrote in 2019 that "the socialist theory of class says a lot. What it doesn't say, however, is that other forms of oppression don't matter." This common sense notion of "both/and" arguments about class oppression and other forms, as opposed to a facile desire to rank human miseries and the injustices that cause them, seems so obvious that it's remarkable that progressive spaces are so often wracked with infighting over whose oppression is the worst. I have long suspected that such fights occupy so much time in the far left because the far left has such little power; unable to actually achieve the change we desire in the world, we squabble endlessly over who holds what level of priority in the movement, as this seems like the only laurel we can fight for. But if we ever are to take power, we will have to do so as a coherent and cohesive movement, and I believe the only way to achieve that internal consistency is through appeals to socioeconomic class, on the simple logic that all people worry about money.

We should of course want to cultivate the moral imagination, by which I mean the capacity to think about the suffering of groups we do not belong to, recognize the injustice they face, and resolve to work to end that injustice. But as I said above, politics is the art of self-interest. That great god of collectivism Karl Marx acknowledged that human beings operate based on self-interest. "Individuals have always started out [politically] from themselves," wrote Marx, "and could not do otherwise." The foundation of his politics, though, was the belief that the politics of personal interest *develops into* a class politics, when people are free of self-delusion. And they

develop that way because a self-interested person, if free from the myopia that Marx called false consciousness, will inevitably come to understand that the only way to win the battle against exploitation is for all of the exploited to band together and fight it en masse.

The question thus becomes, what form of exploitation do the most possible people face? And the obvious answer there is socioeconomic hardship. We can't rally people around the needs of racial groups when there are several such groups in our society, particularly given that a majority of the largest among them seems firmly ensconced in the Republican party. We can't rally people based on gender when society is split about halfway down the middle between cisgender men and women, and with the various other gender identities numerically tiny. We can't rally people around sexual orientation when we don't all share the same sexual orientation, especially given the way that gay identity has ceased to be a politically live issue in and of itself since the legalization of gay marriage. You can't build unity by fixating on difference; it's nonsensical.

But everyone has to pay the rent. Almost everyone has lean months and hard years. Many people struggle to afford groceries; everybody, at some stage, feels wronged by the boss but unable to do anything about it. I have my misgivings about the "We Are the 1%" framing that emerged from Occupy; in my first book, I argued that we must pay equal attention to the divide between the bottom 80% and the top 20%, given the way that the top quintile (my quintile) has pulled away from the rest of the country. But the basic wisdom that impossibly wealthy individuals and institutions have rigged the deck against the common man is as true as it has ever been and represents a great messaging opportunity. And of course unlike with white people vs. the rest, gay people vs. the rest, trans people vs. the rest etc. framing, the numbers are on our side when we emphasize social class. There's only 1% of people in the 1%, after all, and the top 20% are outnumbered four to one.

[this section will be populated with recent stats] Public polling confirms that, while there are the typical partisan and ideological divides that split the country more or less in half, feeling worried and angered by one's socioeconomic position is a very common condition. X% of Americans feel that the economy is headed in the wrong direction, according to X poll. Only X% identify themselves as mostly confident or totally confident in their ability to maintain financial stability in the coming year. For another indicator, polling consistently shows that Americans feel that they lack the financial flexibility to cover even small financial emergencies. For example, a poll in 202X found that X% of Americans felt they would have at least some difficulty in paying an unexpected $250 bill. Wonks frequently dispute the accuracy of that kind of statistic, but for our purposes what matters is less the reality of how many Americans can pay unexpected bills and more how many feel that they couldn't, as this speaks to ambient economic anxieties. The percentage of American workers who feel they were appropriately paid at their job in 202x was X%, according to poll, while X% said they feel they are provided with avenues for career advancement. And X% would quit their jobs immediately if they had the financial ability to do so.

These numbers speak to the opportunity that organizing around issues of wages, employment, and financial security represents. Even when majorities respond to such polls positively, the existence of large minorities who are underpaid, unsatisfied, or afraid can be used to stoke the basic human desire for fairness. We don't need to exaggerate the number of people living in poverty to convince the electorate that any number is too high, nor do we need to pretend that everyone is unhappy at work to make the argument that the workplace is a site of exploitation and dissatisfaction. It's worth pointing out that the basic American partisan political situation has been, for decades now, that Democrats have more popular economic policies but less popular

social views, while Republicans prefer unpopular economic policies that favor the wealthy but effectively leverage the divisiveness of Democratic cultural issues to win. George W. Bush's "compassionate conservatism" was at its heart a Republican appeal to economic justice, and while he did not govern compassionately he was able to lead the GOP out of the hard-right economic politics of Reaganism and back into the White House. (Albeit while losing the popular vote.) Donald Trump's economic populism proved to be almost entirely empty, and his signature legislation as president was (of course) a tax cut for the rich. But by promising not to touch Medicare and Social Security, which failed Vice Presidential candidate Paul Ryan had constantly threatened to do, he helped make himself viable in purple states like Wisconsin and Michigan, which won him the presidency. Meanwhile his opponent appeared to hurt her chances by failing to emphasize the economic populism of her agenda.

Just laying this basic condition out makes me nervous, as referring to the unpopularity of Democratic social positions and hybrid social-economic issues like immigrants invites claims that I am asking the left of center to abandon Black people, women, immigrants, and the like. Most absurdly, this kind of talk sometimes results in talk of a "red-brown alliance," the idea that one can win by fusing the economic populism of communism with the hatred of the Other of fascism. (No one advocates for this alliance themselves, mind you, but rather accuse others of advocating it as a way to discredit them.) But those are absurd distractions. There is no contradiction between a strategy of emphasizing shared economic need and protecting minority rights. And the idea is not at all to abandon social issues entirely, but to pay careful attention to how they are framed and discussed. Immigration, for example, is a polarizing issue in American life, and polling on broad amnesties or large increases in total immigration typically shows broad resistance, even among traditional liberal constituencies. But more nuanced questions about

topics like legal paths to citizenship for those already here tend to poll better, suggesting that the public is at least somewhat receptive on this issue. On abortion, the question of framing and narrative are hugely important. Most Americans believe in a legal right to abortion, but the question is susceptible to framing and often turns on in which week of pregnancy abortions might take place. The famous dictum that abortion should be safe, legal, and rare has attracted a good deal of ire from feminist activists, and in a vacuum I agree; my preferences for abortion is that it be safe, legal, and accessed as often as women need to access it. But I recognize that my position is not shared by most of my fellow voters, and an insistence on unfettered abortion access is unlikely to be a political winner. We would thus want to be moderate and careful in our appeals about the issue while staunchly defending abortion access in practice. After all, if Democrats appearing to be extremists about abortion results in a Republican taking office, then abortion rights will be threatened far beyond any restrictions liberals might agree to on the campaign trail. And the most effective way to defuse such radioactive social issues is by returning the conversation to basic pocketbook issues of economic policy, where the left-of-center has an advantage.

Finally, I must simply assert something, a point of view I won't try to justify with empirical evidence but which I believe both myself and most of you reading this believe: I think most people want to come together across difference for the good of all, rather than to be divided into smaller and smaller slices based on identity categories they don't control. Over the past several years, American progressives have begun to reinstitute a pernicious form of segregation. Sometimes this segregation is literal, as when they form "affinity groups" at school or work, where people are separated out into groups of Black or Hispanic or Asian or gay or trans or disabled or other. This segregation (which is the only honest term for it) is meant to make the

members of these groups comfortable. But the very concept is inimical to solidarity, the most basic means and end of left politics. Solidarity requires that we see common humanity, that we recognize shared struggle, that we look at the suffering of another and imagine ourselves in their position and are thus moved to work for better for them. However noble the intent of intersectional politics may be, by fixating relentlessly on the need to stress difference, those who practice them are undermining the capacity for the only tool that might relieve those very oppressions they decry, people power, the formation of a mass movement.

As Todd Gitlin once wrote, "if there is no people, only peoples, there is no left."

A Book Proposal

Writing Itself

xxxxx

Attention:

Submitted by

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Writing Itself

by Fredrik deBoer

A.   In One Sentence

Researchers in the field of college writing have moved away from their traditional roots in the teaching of prose composition in favor of obscure and impractical theoretical and political concerns, to the detriment of students and teachers alike, and should return to consideration of writing itself for reasons of pedagogical best practice and self-interest in a changing academic world.

B.   Premise

Imagine if the field of physics had decided to cease teaching physics to undergraduates. Imagine if computer scientists declared the study of coding old fashioned. Imagine if historians insisted that asking students to demonstrate their knowledge of history was politically untenable. Imagine if nursing programs in colleges and universities argued against the importance and value of nursing as a subject. Imagine if scholars within mathematics claimed that we lived in a post-math world. Imagine if graduate students in education wrote dissertations that were specifically designed to demonstrate their lack of interest in education itself. Imagine if the most prominent sociology conferences and journals essentially stopped accepting presentations or papers on sociology itself.

All of these hypotheticals may seem absurd, and yet they are a reality in writing studies, the academic discipline historically concerned with how people write, how writing is taught and learned, and how writing programs should be designed, administered, and assessed. Once a discipline that existed specifically to argue for writing's value and importance as a topic of academic inquiry, the field of writing studies has since come to denigrate the subject itself. The field's originators argued that teaching writing was a complex, intellectually-challenging activity, one which deserved professional recognition and the attention of researchers. But now, writing studies has rejected the traditional study of prose writing – the arrangement of words into sentences, paragraphs, and papers, in order to achieve some persuasive, practical, or aesthetic goal – in favor of a series of fads and political movements that would not be recognizable as the study of writing to the large majority of people within academia or our broader culture.

In place of the study of writing as understood by most people, the field of writing studies focuses on abstract theory that, while sometimes important and useful, has little to say about how to help students become competent writers; on technological questions that are already amply discussed in other fields, often with greater depth and grasp of technological details; on political arguments that lend credence to complaints about liberal bias in the academy, and which paradoxically accelerate conservative reforms of higher education; on pop culture

analysis, which often appears trivial and unworthy of funding to stakeholders within and outside our universities; and on other topics which are remarkably disconnected from the study of how people put words on a page.

Rather than seeking status and respect by distancing ourselves from the traditional study of writing, I argue that we can increase our disciplinary visibility, and with it our institutional security and authority, by being strident advocates for the value of prose instruction. I demonstrate that, far from having a radical impact on how colleges operate, the politicized intransigence of writing studies has marginalized the field, leaving us unable to advocate for our own values and making it easier for corporate interests to take over our field. Worse, our reticence about researching and teaching traditional prose leaves our students behind, depriving them of essential skills in an uncertain labor market. I present a vision for a reinvigorated field of writing studies, one housing a diverse range of interests and viewpoints which nevertheless focuses on our traditional subject matter. This newly focused, spirited field will be in a far better position to meet the administrative, pedagogical, economic, and political challenges of the future.

C. **Audience and Promotion**

This book is a hybrid, intended for both academic and popular readers alike. The target audience includes scholars in writing studies, rhetoric and composition, technical communications, and related fields, and could serve well as a text for assignment in graduate programs in those fields. The book is also of obvious and direct relevance to administrators and policymakers in academia, who must make decisions about where to direct scarce resources and how to reward research and teaching. Texts from within writing studies that consider similar issues, albeit from very different perspectives, include Susan Miller's *Textual Carnivals* (1991), David Smit's *The End of Composition Studies* (2007), and Sid Dobrin's *Postcomposition* (2011).

There is also a clear popular audience for this book. It fits comfortably within a tradition of critiques of current practices within the academy designed for popular audiences, and resonates well with books from a diverse set of ideological and disciplinary backgrounds, such as Benjamin Ginsberg's *The Fall of the Faculty* (2011), Kevin Carey's *The End of College* (2015), Leonard Cassuto's *The Graduate School Mess: What Caused It and How We Can Fix It* (2015) and Richard Arum and Joseph Roksa's *Academically Adrift* (2011). The book not only would reflect on current controversies about the contemporary university system, but also about the relevance and future of the humanities and the meaning of a liberal education in the 21st century, topics of perpetual interest to the book-reading public.

I am in a strong position to promote this book. Purdue's rhetoric and composition program is one of the oldest and most respected within the field of writing studies. I have a large network of academics and scholars who would spread the word about the book. As Communications Editor of a popular online journal in the field, I am plugged in to the major publications and communities in the field where ideas and opinions are spread. I can also publicize the book through the network I've developed as a writer and blogger. While my readership is comparatively small, my readers are influential and connected; as a prominent

writer friend once said to me privately, "not many people read you, but everyone who reads you writes professionally." My readership is passionate and has long supported me financially, demonstrating the likelihood that they will purchase the book themselves. My work has been discussed in major publications like *The New York Times*, *The Atlantic*, *The Wall Street Journal*, *USA Today*, *New York Magazine*, *Slate*, *The Huffington Post*, *The New Republic,* and many others. (Sometimes even positively!) I have many friends within the world of professional political and cultural writing, and I could easily find willing readers to discuss and potentially blurb the book.

D.   Manuscript

Manuscript Status: Two chapters are completed and available for your review on request. Two others are partially written. All six are fully outlined, and a significant portion of primary research has already been completed.

Anticipated Length: 200 - 225 pages

Anticipated Completion Date: Eight months from proposal acceptance

E.   Author

I am a writer and academic who recently completed a PhD in Rhetoric and Composition at Purdue University, where I studied writing pedagogy and administration, English as a Second Language, and applied linguistics. A child of the academy, I grew up on a college campus, and my father and his father were professors. My network of friends and family has always included a large number of academics at a wide range of institutions. I have thus had a lifetime of exposure to the American university, its culture, and its idiosyncrasies.

I'm also an experienced and successful writer and blogger. I have been writing since 2008 on issues relating to politics and culture. My work has appeared in *Harper's Magazine, The New York Times Magazine*, *The Los Angeles Times, The New Republic, The Washington Post, Politico, Playboy, n+1, The Huffington Post, The Observer, Salon*, *The New Inquiry*, *Jacobin*, *Talking Points Memo*, *In These Times,* Andrew Sullivan's *The Dish*, and others. My work on culture has been linked to and discussed on many of the most widely-read publications and websites in the world. I regularly contribute academic work to journals and books, attend conferences within the field, and am an active participant on listservs and online communities dedicated to writing studies and related fields.

F.   **Chapter by Chapter**

Chapter One: When We Left Writing Behind

Chapter One provides both a historical overview of the changing world of writing studies and related disciplines and empirical evidence of the trend I describe. I briefly gloss the history of the field and its painful, contested emergence within English departments, particularly its quarrels with literature faculty. I use historical sources to demonstrate that writing studies gained disciplinary status by articulating the value of the teaching of writing and of research devoted to that teaching. Drawing inspiration from the work of scholars like Richard Haswell, Susan Peck MacDonald, and Benjamin Miller, I then demonstrate

empirically that the study of written prose and its teaching has declined dramatically in the field's prominent journals, conferences, and doctoral programs. Finally, I discuss how these changes alienate the field of writing studies from broader conceptions of writing in the university system, leading to an inability to communicate meaningfully with educators in other departments and a corresponding lack of institutional investment in our programs and our pedagogy. I argue that the definition of success in writing must come from a negotiation between what scholars in writing studies believe and what other stakeholders in our institution believe, and that such negotiations can proceed without jeopardizing the theoretical and political commitments of the field.

Chapter Two: A Room of Our Own: Disciplinarity, Knowledge Making, and Service

Chapter Two discusses the disciplinarity obsession within writing studies – the field's own constant interrogation of what the field is, what its standing within the university system is, and what its values are – and why these considerations are so ubiquitous. I argue that the "service anxiety" within writing studies, or the fear that other disciplines view writing pedagogy as a service discipline rather than a legitimate area of research inquiry, has pushed scholars to develop ever more obscure interests, creating a field that seems bizarrely disinterested in its own subject matter. I go on to argue that in fact, the best way for writing studies to secure respect and autonomy within the broader university system is through a clear focus on teaching writing, as the ability to write effectively is an essential skill for college students and thus of natural interest to other fields. I incorporate the theories of Writing Across the Curriculum (WAC) and Writing in the Disciplines (WID), which argue that writing education must take place simultaneously across various units of our institutions. I demonstrate how research in these areas makes clear that we lose standing within the broader academic world when we fail to reflect understanding of what instructors in other fields define as success in writing. I argue that WAC and WID programs afford us the possibility of both developing deeper mutual understanding between scholars in writing studies and other fields, and sites where the value of our work can be recognized by the broader university.

Chapter Three: Pulling Up the Ladder: Grammar and the Self-Interested Student

In Chapter Three I consider the Grammar Wars and language prescriptivism from the standpoint of someone within writing studies. Despite common assumptions to the contrary, researchers and administrators within writing studies tend to fall squarely against grammar instruction, often representing such instruction as old fashioned, reductive, even politically conservative. They argue instead for a focus on global concerns of rhetoric and style, and for a cosmopolitan rejection of any normative vision of language or writing at all. This attitude is exemplified by the Students Right to Their Own Language statement, an official statement of the field's major professional organization and conference which asserts that attempting to regulate student language in our classes amounts to linguistic hegemony. While their intentions are good, these scholars risk "pulling up the ladder" by denying students the control and precision in writing that they themselves use in their own writing. Whether we like it or not, control of grammar and mechanics is an important element of success both elsewhere in the university system and in the workplaces that are the ultimate destination of

most of our students. I argue for a hybrid approach to grammar, pursuing neither the reductive, rote learning that writing scholars fear nor the "anything goes" approach that threatens to leave students behind. Instead, we can and should embrace the teaching of grammar and mechanics in situ, as a form of rhetorical and stylistic attention that students should pay to their own texts.

Chapter Four: Whose Resistance? The Paradox of Critical Pedagogy

Chapter Four considers the ways in which critical pedagogy and similar political visions of college teaching have contributed to the demise of writing within writing studies. While the work of Paulo Freire and others in the critical pedagogy tradition is vital and generative, the embrace of these philosophies by college instructors leads to contradictory and self-defeating consequences. As writing studies scholars like Thomas Rickert and Richard Miller have pointed out, when critical pedagogy is adopted by college instructors, the power relationships become confused and paradoxical. After all, if instructors want students to resist in the classroom, and the students give the instructors what they want, that's not resistance. In this way, organic student resistance becomes appropriated by the very educational authority that Freire and others criticize. What's more, by playing so perfectly to conservative claims of liberal bias in academia, in the long run the popularity of critical pedagogy contributes to corporate reforms of the American university. Finally, I argue that the ability to write persuasively is a key skill for activists, and that helping our students develop this ability amounts to support for their radical efforts in and of itself.

Chapter Five: Assessment and Ownership in the 21st Century University

Chapter Five concerns assessment in the contemporary university, and how writing programs have rendered themselves unprepared for a new wave of standardized tests and top-down assessment regimes. While a large literature on writing assessment exists, resistance to empiricism and quantification leave scholars from writing studies largely outside of broader policy debates about testing and assessment. In turn, this leaves us unable to advocate for our values and best practices in contexts where our opinions might make a difference. I argue that we can retain our skepticism towards claims of objectivity, and our advocacy for qualitative inquiry, while still engaging with numbers and formal empiricism where useful. In order to do so, we will have to restructure our doctoral programs to make some of our graduates conversant in quantification and social science. Then, we will better be able to defend our autonomy and our ideals.

Chapter Six: Reforming Process: Towards an Iterative Writing Pedagogy

For many decades, college writing pedagogy has been approached through a process model that teaches students to see composing as an ongoing evolution rather than as a journey to a single, defined endpoint. Writing teachers frequently stress to students that they define writing not through their finished papers but through the process with which they composed them. This orientation is noble, but in practice, the process model suffers from an artificiality that limits its usefulness. Students are frequently taught to move mechanically through stages such as Invention, Research, Composition, and Revision. Experienced writers, however, very rarely write texts in this rigid fashion. In place of the traditional, stages-based process model,

in this chapter I define and advocate a form of writing process pedagogy defined by iteration – demonstrating small, repeated evolutions of specific sentences and paragraphs to students, and encouraging them to practice such moves themselves. In much the same way that a math instructor might lead students through many examples of specific arithmetic problems before letting students attempt them themselves, writing instructors should lead students by showing them direct and real examples of how sentences, paragraphs, and papers change over time. The result will be a writing pedagogy that is at once more practical, more effective, and more true to the writing process of skilled and professional writers.

Epilogue: Writing as Soulcraft, Writing as Tool

The epilogue of this book amounts to a valediction of writing, itself – not just as a means to an end, but as an end itself, one of both practical and personal value and significance to students and teachers alike. I argue for the intertwined nature of writing's practical, aesthetic, and rhetorical value, rescuing writing and writing instruction from the various boxes they have been forced into by theorists – boxes like the rhetorical, mimetic, and expressivist philosophies. I criticize the notion that we must privilege writing as either a matter of personal expression or of appeal to others, arguing that all writing is inherently both. I close by describing all of the ways in which a talent for expressing myself in prose has enriched my life: personally, professionally, academically, financially, socially, romantically. I argue that in a world obsessed with the latest technologies, constantly ready to declare itself post-text, the written word remains a unique and privileged mode of address, and that if we teach students to use it effectively, we and they will be better for it.

Madness in the 21st Century

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Overview

Something has gone badly wrong in the modern culture and discourse of mental health. The concept of mental illness has become something distorted and strange. The tattered quilt of America's healthcare system has long cast a pall over our mental health discourse, with far too many who legitimately need help unable to get it. But where access to treatment has always been problematic in our system, a new threat to mental healthcare and mental health has emerged in the digital age – a series of changes to how mental illness is conceptualized, diagnosed, discussed, and sometimes treated. And though these cultural changes have been driven by the best of intentions, they've resulted in perverse consequences, confusing the definition of mental illness and making it harder for those with real and severe disorders to receive the help they need. Getting treatment was always hard. New developments in the culture of mental illness are making it even harder.

The rise of the internet enabled all of these unfortunate changes. With the popularization of the World Wide Web in the mid-1990s and the emergence of smartphones in the late 2000s, medical information that once had to be sought out from doctors and therapists were suddenly available to almost everyone, everywhere. Knowledge once locked away in books that were inaccessible both practically and intellectually was suddenly both plentiful and free. Given that America's medical system still left millions without practical access to care, particularly when it came to mental healthcare, it was natural that more and more people would set about to try and use these tools to better understand their own ailing minds. And in and of itself, greater availability of medical information is not harmful. But there are major dangers associated with too much populism in the medical space. Many people are afflicted with hypochondria, and even for those who aren't, the sudden presence of so much information about so many potential medical conditions can make it hard to resist the temptation to self-diagnose. This tendency is especially hard to avoid when it comes to mental illnesses, which lack objective physiological diagnostic criteria. Worse still, the internet doesn't merely provide individuals with information that can lead them to believe they have disorders they don't. It also creates communities that celebrate those disorders, inducing a profound temptation to adopt these illnesses as a kind of ready-made personality; shorn from the context of the ruined lives of the actually severely mentally ill, the

performance of rare and typically debilitating mental disorders becomes just another matter of personal branding. And in the 21ˢᵗ century, there's always space to stage such a performance.

While the internet as a grand theater for the creation of the self is a cross-generational phenomenon, it's the young who have most enthusiastically leaped into that effort. As we entered the third decade of this millennium, we witnessed the rise of the first generation that had spent essentially its entire life online. With their constant online connectivity, addiction to their phones, and obsessive participation in forums like Tumblr, Gen Z has proven to be the ideal vehicle for this vast experience in the creation of the self. And, sadly, mental illness has proven to be perfect fodder for this game. With its inherent access to the visceral and profound, the long history of well-meaning artists romanticizing what are unfortunate medical conditions, and the way a diagnosis can add shape and coherence to a human life, mental illness presented impressionable young adolescents with an ideal vehicle for self-creation. Sad and lonely young people, mostly young women, began taking to the internet to identify themselves with a panoply of medical disorders, some physical, some mental – autism, fibromyalgia, ADHD, Ehlers-Daniels syndrome, borderline personality disorder, Tourette's. As they did so, they shifted the gravity of our communal understanding of these disorders and of mental illness. Already marginalized, the profoundly autistic and the homeless people with schizoaffective disorder and the catatonic patients in long-term care facilities were further pushed out of the conversation. In their place were young people trying on disorders for fashion, which many of them would go on to discard when the pantomime was no longer fun.

This may sound overly harsh, but the process I'm describing fits perfectly with the long-established reality of social contagion. The term refers to the tendencies of some maladies to spread mimetically, through discourse and communication rather than through the traditional vectors of disease. The prototypical case is anorexia, which has been conclusively shown to have been virtually unheard of in many societies, only to suddenly spread among impressionable people once the concept emerged in the public consciousness. (Such metaphorically viral spread of mental illness and behavioral disorders is exhaustively documented in Ethan Watters's 2010 book *Crazy Like Us: The Globalization of the American Psyche*.) In that context, social media's role as an incubator of performative fictitious mental illness makes perfect sense. And that dynamic has reached its zenith with the short-form video platform TikTok, which has captured

the hearts of adolescent America better than any social network before it and which is perfectly constructed for the performance of illness.

All of these conditions – the serial inadequacy of the American healthcare system, the sudden availability of massive amounts of unfiltered information, social networks that spread ideas mimetically, the ballooning risk of social contagion, and online spaces dominated by adolescents fighting to understand their world and themselves – have congealed into a strange, sad new culture of mental health. The old paradigm of imperious doctors and obscure diagnostic criteria, obviously flawed, has given way to a cacophony of competing knowledge, data, fact, conjecture, and conspiracy, with each individual left to sort one from the other and patients left feeling more and more empowered to simply define all of their medical problems and treatments themselves. This is all suboptimal from a patient standpoint, given the likelihood that self-treatment will go wrong, but also from the perspective of the medical system: handing ordinary people access to vast amounts of information about their health, some of it dubious, makes them both fretful and overly confident in their understanding of their own bodies. They become simultaneously over- and under-informed, knowing all about rare disorders and obscure tests and expensive procedures without the wisdom to understand why doctors so often counsel them not to worry about that stuff. Many within the medical system have argued persuasively that all of this patient knowledge (or "knowledge") has led to constant pressure on doctors to prescribe unnecessary medication, order pointless tests, and give in to self-diagnosing patients, who will simply shop for another doctor until they get what they want. And all of these problems are amplified for mental illness, where there exists no objective tests for almost any disorder.

Yet despite the vast influence of this informational overload, the effects might not be so pernicious were it not for the concerted efforts of a small but influential and highly-motivated group of people. I'm referring to the "disability rights" movement, closely aligned with disability studies in academia – indeed, this political tendency is a phenomenon of the college educated almost without exception, and the most elite schools are vastly overrepresented in its number. That movement, which enjoys a much larger presence in the media, academia, and the nonprofit sector than its actual prevalence in our society, has pushed very hard to redefine disability. Rather than referring to medical conditions as hindrances that present challenges to individuals, but do not define them, disability is assumed now to function as an identity category in and of itself, in

much the same way that race, gender, and sexual orientation do. To be disabled is not to have something, in this worldview, but to be something. You are no longer someone struggling with schizophrenia. You are now a Disabled Person and a Schizophrenic.

This seems to have obvious negative aspects when it comes to the willingness to be treated and the desire to be cured; someone who just is their disorder is someone with little incentive to want to get better. But worse, the activist insistence that disability is identity has brought with it the corollary that we must therefore not talk as if any disorder is bad, negative, pernicious, unhealthy. After all, if you are your disorder, then that means that anyone saying that your disorder is a hindrance or burden is making a value judgment about you and your life – and, given the politics at play, this insult is an identity crime, a form of bigotry. Thus the basic reality that disorders, disabilities, illnesses are negative things, harmful things, becomes unmentionable. Those who say otherwise are at risk of accusations of "ableism," a capacious and vague term that nevertheless has accrued considerable social power in progressive spaces. The consequences of this turn are comprehensively perverse. For example, activist culture insists that psychotic disorders are not inherently harmful and that people who have them – not who *suffer* from them, as there's nothing bad about them – can learn to "live with the voices." They advocate for a blanket end to any kind of involuntary treatment, even for those with a history of debilitating afflictions that rob people of their autonomy and which compel them to be more violent than the larger population. (That last fact is waved away by activists, but it is a fact, according to the National Institute of Mental Health.) These attitudes, which have grown deeply influential, are based on the pleasant and false notion that people with severe mental illness can always make rational and autonomous choices. But rationality and autonomy are exactly what these disorders rob from us.

Meanwhile, the families of people with such disorders, as with the families of those with profound autism, have been written out of the conversation by standpoint theory and the dictates of identity politics. The common social justice demand "nothing about us, without us" – that is, no conversations about a given identity issue without representatives of that identity group – is problematic in the best of circumstances. When it comes to psychotic disorders, it's lethal. Standpoint theory assumes that those who are from a given identity will always have better understanding of an issue than those who are not. But severe forms of mental illness distort our

perception of the world around us; they fill our minds with delusions and paranoia. Not only are people with severe mental illness not the best equipped to understand their own lives, they are frequently the worst. Yet modern activist culture cannot accommodate this deviation from the script. This provokes one of the worst elements of everything I'm describing: because the severely ill are inconvenient for the political arguments of the activist class, the severely ill are marginalized, undiscussed. Luckily for activists, schizophrenics who sleep under bridges are unable to join the national discourse on mental health, as are catatonics in institutions, the nonverbal autistic, and all manner of people with the deepest problems. Meanwhile, thanks to the viral spread of disorders like ADHD and autism – legitimate conditions that deserve medical care, treatment, and compassion when genuinely endured – the conversation inevitably veers away from those with schizophrenia, bipolar disorder, schizoaffective disorder, and similar. They are thus made invisible by the actions of those who claim to work to increase the visibility of mental illness.

The ranks of the mentally-ill-but-upwardly-mobile have swelled in part because so many well-meaning people have worked so hard to banish stigma towards mental illness, the unfair treatment of people with psychiatric disorders based on the notion that they are inherently dangerous, unable to participate in civic life, and incapable of recovery. Those old attitudes helped motivate the tendency to hide mental illness away, to render it unmentionable, exemplified by Rosemary Kennedy, whose psychiatric struggles and lobotomy were perceived to be a threat to her family's dynasty. In and of itself, the fight to normalize *people with mental illness* can be a noble one. The trouble is that activists have worked to normalize *mental illness itself*, which has perverse consequences, including the preeminence of the most normal in the debate. And the demise of stigma has meant that there is no countervailing force to the tendency to play act these conditions, especially in the era of online clout. With its war on stigma, the disability rights movement has created a cultural space where there is little reason not to want to be mentally ill and some obvious incentives in appearing to be so. The result is predictable.

Now, we're left in a country where treatment is no more affordable or accessible than it once was, but where the concept of mental illness has been casualized to such an extent that serving the mentally population is harder. We've developed an ethos that suggests that people who have been robbed of their rational minds should nevertheless have unfettered ability to direct their

own lives. We've created a youth culture where young people look at potentially debilitating disorders like borderline personality disorder and bipolar disorder as interesting and quirky identities, ready-made personalities for the lonely. We've made the job of getting the severely ill into treatment and keeping them there much harder for families, social service workers, and doctors. In this book, I will describe a broken mental health culture. I'll locate the present moment in the context of the history of insanity, and describe all the ways madness in the 21st century has gone very wrong. I'll argue that the fundamental activist focus should be to expand practical access to mental healthcare, which as it stands remains out of reach of far too many Americans. And I'll suggest alternatives to everything I've described, other paths and approaches to the treatment of disorders of the mind that can help engender sympathy and respect for the severely mentally ill.

Author

I'm a writer and academic who's been a prolific blogger and freelancer for almost 15 years. As a freelancer, I've been published in some of the biggest magazines and newspapers in the world. In print, my work has appeared in *The New York Times Magazine, New York Magazine, Harper's, The Los Angeles Times*, and *The Washington Post*, among others. Online, my work has appeared at places like *The Guardian, The Boston Globe, The Chronicle of Higher Education, Politico, Playboy, The New Republic, Foreign Policy, n+1, Jacobin*, and many others. My first book, *The Cult of Smart*, was published by St. Martin's Press in 2020. My second book, *How Elites Ate the Social Justice Movement*, was published by Simon & Schuster in 2023. My self-titled Substack is one of the most widely-read and best-earning across the platform. I hold a PhD in English from Purdue University, where I focused in writing assessment and educational policy. I live in Connecticut with my girlfriend and my cat. I have battled with my bipolar disorder since my first manic episode in 2002. I have been well-treated and effectively medicated since 2017.

Audience and Promotion

I am a well-known presence on the internet and have cultivated a passionate audience over the past 15 years of writing for public consumption. I have an influential newsletter on Substack with a mailing list of almost 50,000 and a paid subscriber list of about 6,000. My readers are unusually likely to share my posts on Facebook or Twitter. I have a large network of friends and colleagues in media and academia, many of whom are happy to promote my work when needed.

I have almost 5,000 Facebook connections between Friends and Followers. I have appeared on dozens of podcasts as well as on national television and radio in both the United States and Canada. My last book was written up in many of the biggest publications in our newsmedia. I have written for many of the biggest newspapers and magazines in the country. I have effectively weaponized the demented incentives of online micro-celebrity.

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Chapter Outline

Case Study: Dissociative Identity and TikTok

We begin with an indicative example to demonstrate the insanity in our discourse about insanity – "DID TikTok," the trend of performing dissociative identity disorder (that is, multiple personalities) for fame and community. In recent years there's been an explosion of interest and claims of diagnosis of the disorder, coincident with the rise of Tumblr and TikTok, where there are thriving communities of adolescents who claim to have dozens of "alters" and who refer to themselves as "systems," along with a whole boutique identity vocabulary that they've developed. The number of views of videos tagged with #DID on TikTok is in the billions.

And yet dissociative identity disorder may not even be real. Its presence in the DSM has proven to be persistently and deeply controversial. Diagnostic criteria and standards are perceived by many to be highly impressionistic and unacceptably subject to the biases of the evaluator. The disorder reflects a cinematic and exaggerated vision of what mental illness looks like, which may make it more attractive to people looking for a diagnosis. Many high-profile cases have been revealed to be frauds or, at least, the product of a therapist or doctor forcing patients to think they have it. The most famous DID patient, "Sybil," was later revealed to be a matter of a therapist pursuing fame and an impressionable patient. Even if we accept the disorder's existence and are

particularly generous in our criteria, the number of genuine cases from the past one hundred years is probably somewhere in the three digits. It's that rare, if real. And its newfound prevalence among adolescents is particularly hard to understand, given that the condition has generally been identified among those in their 30s and 40s and is even rarer among the young.

The people who have traditionally been treated for DID have suffered, greatly, and not in the cool arty time-to-dye-my-hair-again type of suffering common to social media performance, but actual, painful, pitiable suffering. Those patients who have been diagnosed in the past with the disorder, by doctors, and who have spent years and years dealing with the consequences, are often truly debilitated people, whether the disorder itself is real or not. They require intense therapy, are often medicated with powerful drugs, and are frequently subject to long-term hospitalization. They tend to live broken and pain-filled lives, like most people with serious mental illness.

Of the dozens of high-follower DID accounts that I've seen, almost none are experiencing any of that. Plenty of them are in therapy, but judging from how they talk about it, it all seems to be of the customer service variety of therapy. Hardly any of them say they're medicated, which I guess makes sense - every last one I've seen comes from the school that sees mental illness as some adorable personality quirk that makes them unique and high status, rather than as a source of great pain and personal destruction. They don't take meds because they don't think there's anything to treat. And, indeed, they aren't living with disability, in any meaningful sense.

On the contrary, they're flourishing, going about self-actualized and successful lives, getting into Ivy League schools, bragging about their social media clout, being girlbosses. This is the status of mental illness in youth culture today, where we are expected to extend every accommodation to those who say they have mental illness even as they would seem to require no accommodation at all; they would like the laurel of victimhood without the actuality of being victimized.

In this introduction I'll use this mess to draw readers into my argument, demonstrating how dissociative identity disorder and TikTok are an emblem of everything that's gone wrong with mental health culture. I'll suggest that it's a perfect example of the predictable behaviors you get when you allow mental illness to become a marker for identity and a tool to get attention. And I'll show how this weird fringe internet community is a symbol of modern mental health culture as a whole.

Disability, "Disability," and Identity

In an earlier era, disability advocates used to argue against the stigma that accrues to mental illness by saying things like "you wouldn't stigmatize diabetes, would you?" The point was that mental illnesses were ordinary medical issues, disorders or diseases to be managed, treated, and cured like any other. The association with diseases of the body was intended to provoke sympathy and compel people to not unduly blame the mentally ill for their conditions, as few people would do with diabetes, or cancer, or heart disease. And it was also invoked to ward off the effects of stigma, that vague and malign force that has become the obsession of the disability rights community.

Well, over time there has been a convergence of sorts in how diabetes and mental illness have come to be viewed, but not in the direction that was once intended. Rather than mental illnesses coming to be seen as mere challenges faced by those who have them, things people deal with rather than things they *are*, now all disabilities have come to occupy the position that mental illnesses once did – identities, totalizing explanations of the self. The idea that people simply were their mental illnesses, once a notion that inspired great offense among many in that community, has become ubiquitous and politicized. Teens playact their mental illnesses on social media while nonprofits insist that the concept of the mentally ill person is as meaningful and coherent as that of the gay person, the Irish person, or the Black person. Hashtags multiply endlessly to denote membership in the club of the disabled generally, of the mentally ill, of the "neurodivergent," of individual disorders, diseases, and diagnoses. Now, the idea that a disability could ever be a mere element of a human being, an aspect of their life, is out of fashion, bordering on offensive. Now, rather than using modern medicine to minimize the negative effects of their conditions, many people craft their entire personas to fit their disorders. Disability has become a checklist item on dating apps.

In this chapter I'll discuss this evolution in how disability is seen by society and by the disabled. I'll discuss the consequences of seeing disability as an identity, particularly how such identification can actively obstruct healing – if your "brand" is your illness, your incentive is to

never get better. And I'll argue that if you simply are your disability, you must be a powerfully boring person.

Children of Szasz – The Enduring Power of Anti-Psychiatry

You might understandably assume that the most influential figures in the medical field of psychiatry have been practitioners, theorists, and drug developers, like Freud, Jung, or the creators of Prozac. But a strong case can be made that in fact the most important voice in our understanding of mental illness, in the past half-century, has been the Hungarian philosopher Tomas Szasz, the father of the anti-psychiatry movement.

Szasz, who insisted throughout his career that there was no such thing as mental illness, was perfectly positioned in the 1960s and 70s to exploit the ambient counter-cultural spirit of the times. Szasz argued that no matter how deluded a patient might be, and no matter how much their behavior risked their own safety and that of others, what we call mental illness is always a matter of mere preferences, preferences that cut against social norms. This attitude was catnip to the hippies and radicals of the time, who insisted on attacking norms and the establishment in every way they could. Ken Kesey's *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, published in 1962, spoke to this rapidly-growing belief that the idea of mental illness is simply another of society's tools of control. The novel's protagonist Randle McMurphy resists the authority of Big Nurse, a stand-in for polite society, conservatism, The Man, and all of the shibboleths the hippies stood against. Kesey would later insist that the book was more of an allegory than an argument about asylums or mental health specifically. But the popularity of both the book and the much-decorated movie based on it would ensure that many absorbed the lesson that psychiatry was just another tool of control. Szasz rode those instincts to a long career as a commentator on mental illness, giving innumerable interviews on the subject well into the 21st century.

Today, the anti-psychiatry movement is large, well-funded, and remarkably effective. In online forums like Mad in America, its members congregate and trade conspiratorial attitudes about therapy and medication. Anti-psychiatric attitudes are aired regularly in major publications like *The New York Times Magazine.* Many people without any experience with or expertise in mental illness default to a kind of crude anti-psychiatric attitude, sure that mental illnesses are over diagnosed and psychiatric medicines overprescribed with no clear reason for why. The field of

psychiatry is largely distrusted, and legitimate concerns over the influence of the pharmaceutical industry are frequently used to dismiss any use of psychiatric medication at all.

But the scope of this movement and its success in generating public distrust of the field of psychiatry masks many of its ugly aspects. We might start with Szasz; though constantly associated with the left-leaning spirit of the 1960s counterculture, he was in fact a right-wing libertarian who developed his views to further his advocacy for total personal freedom. Far from being a champion of those called mentally ill, he was known to mock them, such as in the famous case of Rebecca Smith. Smith, a schizophrenic woman who lived on the streets of New York in the 1990s, froze to death in a carboard box before social service workers were able to involuntarily commit her to an institution. When confronted with this seemingly obvious argument against handing people with psychotic disorders total freedom, Szasz pronounced Rebecca Smith "pathetic"; she was inconvenient for his philosophy, and thus he could summon no sympathy for her. The anti-psychiatry movement he inspired is a hive of bizarre conspiracy theories and New Age nonsense, full of people trying to treat severely psychotic patients with crystals and homeopathy. The movement overlaps with all manner of ugly countercultures, particularly the anti-vaxx tendency which has caused many affluent parents to refuse to vaccinate their children for mumps and measles and other preventable diseases. The dean of the modern anti-psychiatry movement, Dr. Peter Breggin, has testified many times as an expert witness in lawsuits against pharma companies; he also believes that the CIA has installed mind control chips in the brains of unsuspecting patients and is friendly with Infowars, the conspiracy theory media outlet run by Alex Jones. And worst of all, anti-psychiatry attitudes convince vulnerable people to resist their doctors and stop taking their medication.

In this chapter I'll discuss the anti-psychiatry movement, its origins, and why the mainstream media can't stop legitimizing it. I'll also lay out just why this tendency is so dangerous and why it has to be opposed.

That Dragon, Stigma

Few things define modern disability activism more than the fight against stigma. Stigma, the tendency to treat mental illness as something shameful and the mentally ill as dangerous, scary, and best pushed to the margins of society. Modern disability activism has made opposition to

stigma a top priority – perhaps the top priority – of decent people working within the broad field of mental health. Access to medication, ensuring humane conditions in mental health facilities, funding for the continued development of effective psychiatric drugs – none of these core goals receives anything like the attention that the battle against stigma does. The nonprofit organization NAMI, the National Alliance on Mental Illness, is an important force in the world of mental health policy. Yet in recent years, NAMI has become obsessive about stigma, putting it front and center in their agenda, dedicating more and more of their programming to battling it. And yet stigma is fundamentally a privileged man's problem; those who are psychotic, deluded, committed to an institution, suicidal, or otherwise endangered by their disorders can only dream of a future where their biggest problem is that other people view them negatively.

The fixation on stigma is a perfect metonym for the broader problems that have come to afflict mental health culture: it represents the dominance of the symbolic over the material. Like so much of what I lament here, this fixation stems from the best of intentions; it is of course suboptimal when people perpetuate negative attitudes towards those with mental illness. But something has gone badly wrong when so much attention and energy is devoted to feelings while people suffering from schizophrenia sleep under bridges. In this chapter I'll sketch out the history of social attitudes towards mental illness, explain why the stigma-obsessive model of advocacy is misguided, and chart a better path.

The Gentrification of Disability: How the Most Afflicted Were Written Out of Autism

Autism has commanded national attention for many years. A developmental and cognitive disorder rather than a mental illness, autism's role in our discourse has had a profound impact on our culture's understanding of disability and intersects well with the themes of this book.

Autism has long had some presence in arts and media, but largely as a curio, useful for a plot line on *Law & Order* or for a Very Special Episode of a sitcom. But in the 2000s, autism began to go viral. This started with "awareness" campaigns, the generally apolitical insistence that the autistic needed to be heard and understood by more people. This advocacy was typically based on a vague understanding of the disorder, but it helped raise a lot of money for nonprofits dedicated to the condition. (How much of that money was spent in a way that actually benefited

the autistic is hard to say.) Then, in the 2010s, the autism conversation changed in the way so many others did: the "social justice" rhetoric that was spilling out of elite universities took over the autism discourse. The conversation took on political tones, with autistic people coming to be seen not as those suffering from a medical disorder like any other but as an oppressed class. Autism had become an *identity*, similar to racial or gender identities, and in so doing acquired a revolutionary flavor. Ideas from academia were filtered out through Tumblr and Twitter, and eventually TikTok, until the conversation about autism became dominated by voices calling out for justice rather than treatment or cures. Correspondingly, basic notions about what autism was or meant were subverted, including the very notion that there was anything negative about having autism at all – though advocates still defined autism as a disorder, largely to ensure that those who had it lived under the protections of the Americans with Disabilities Act. (What it means for a disorder to not be a negative condition remains unclear.) And as this was happening, the number of autism diagnoses soared, in some areas tripling from 2000 to the mid-2010s. By 2023 one in thirty-six children had an autism diagnosis.

But as the visibility of autism as a concept grew, the visibility of those most deeply afflicted by autism was perversely reduced. Because so many more people identified as autistic, and because the ideology of autism had become so outwardly celebratory and identity-laden, the cultural space became filled by the voices of those who were most able to speak. Meanwhile, millions of autistic people who are minimally verbal or nonverbal could not participate in the conversation at all, and their families were sidelined under the logic of standpoint theory and the notion that only those who suffer from a condition are free to speak publicly about it. This condition was exacerbated by the death of the Asperger's diagnosis and the recent dogma that holds that there is no such thing as different levels of severity for autism, that in fact to talk of severe autism is bigotry, as there's nothing wrong with autism. The result has been an autism discourse where those who suffer the most from autism have been rendered an inconvenient truth, their families systematically silenced and their interests sidelined.

In this chapter I'll discuss how the sidelining of the most afflicted is rendered inevitable in our modern discourse, and I'll discuss how the sad state of autism debates mirror similar conditions in the world of severe mental illness.

Fakes: Hypochondria, Munchausen's, and the Will to be Ill

Why do some people want to be sick? It's a question that many people find offensive on its face. Nobody wants to be sick! And in an era where disability awareness (or "awareness") has grown to such a great degree, the question risks accusations of insensitivity or even bigotry. The only trouble is that, plainly, some people *do* want to be sick – being disabled has become a source of community, identity, and even income. In the internet era, every aspect of ourselves can be monetized, most certainly including the afflictions that ail us.

The urge to be sick long predates online life. Hypochondria, or the condition of constantly fearing that you are suffering from undiscovered medical ailments, does not entail a conscious desire to be sick. But as with all kinds of anxiety and compulsive fear, those suffering from hypochondria often harbor a conflicted hope that their fears will prove to be correct, in order to affirm the legitimacy of their anxiety. More direct is the desire of those with Munchausen's syndrome. People with Munchausen's go to great length to appear to be ill to those around them, inventing symptoms, engaging in elaborate deceptions to depict the physical markers of illness, sometimes even engaging in activities that make them unwell. The degree to which they are conscious or in control of these behaviors is controversial, but it's generally believed that they are motivated by loneliness and a profound desire for sympathetic attention.

That urge for sympathetic attention is now inescapable, in public life, and many people seek to seem or feel or be ill as a way to bring the regard of others into their lives. This chapter will explore this scenario – sympathetically, critically, always humanely – and why this dynamic is so common now. I'll consider the degree to which online tools are and aren't to blame for the will to be ill. And I'll lay out just how unfair, and how unhealthy, this all is for those who are truly sick.

Locking Someone Up to Save Their Life: James Holmes, Psychotic Violence, and Involuntary Commitment

The violence committed by James Holmes, the mass shooter who killed twelve people and wounded seventy more in a Colorado movie theater, was shocking but not entirely surprising. As a graduate student in neuroscience at the University of Colorado, he had been flagged by a professor as a potential risk to himself and to others. He was evaluated by school psychological personnel, who concluded that he was in fact potentially a danger. But because he did not in fact meet the stringent threshold for involuntary treatment in the United States, a threshold that has

gotten harder and harder to meet over time, he was not forced into any kind of psychiatric treatment. The failure to do so resulted in the death of the twelve, the maiming of the seventy, and the effective end of Holmes's life. Saved by a single juror from the death penalty, he will spend the rest of his life in a maximum security prison. The failure to force involuntary treatment may have preserved Holmes's rights, in a completely abstract sense, but it was the end of his freedom and the life of twelve others.

America's mass shooting epidemic is the stuff of nightmares. Again and again, we check our phones to find that some lunatic has shot up a school, or their workplace, or a public space. Though almost invariably male, they are otherwise remarkably diverse – white, Black, Asian, Hispanic, cis and trans, gay and straight, Christian and atheist and Muslim. And they are participating in a new unholy sacrament in American life, demanding that the world turn its attention on them through the serial spilling of blood.

These acts, obviously, inspire incredible anguish and rage. They also fit perfectly into the modern American culture war, enflaming the left, stoking the defiance of the right. The arguments are well-rehearsed and the lack of resolution preordained. And all of this comes at a particular cost: because those in favor of stricter gun control want to see these crimes as acts of uncomplicated evil, and because the identitarian tendency wants to see them as a function of white male rage despite the previously-mentioned diversity of shooters, the notion that mental illness plays any role in these shootings becomes anathema, a notion that inspires angry reprisals on social media. "Mental illness doesn't do that," goes the offended cry, with many who accept that psychotic disorders can make people believe that demons are crawling up their walls nevertheless unwilling to believe that they can inspire people to pick up a gun. In this unusually stark example of the collision of the politics of personal culpability and the realities of mental illness, an entire ideology about what blame means and who it should accrue to can be sketched. And in this chapter I will sketch it, describing mass shootings as the sharp end of the stick in our culture's continued grappling with mental illness and all of its inconveniences, exploring what motivates these attacks and who, if any, can be said to have committed one because they were sick. And I'll imagine a world where those twelve people are alive and James Holmes is healthy and free.

Disability is Bad

Our emerging culture of mental illness has stemmed from a world in which stigma regarding illness has been consistently rejected and loudly attacked – though, the fashion goes, that stigma remains just as strong as ever, which calls into question why they bother attacking it. The reality is that only in the weird cul de sac of contemporary culture could the supposed stigma attached to disability have been so thoroughly undermined that many millions of self-directed and successful people could take on sickness as an identity, could market themselves based on those conditions which they nonetheless insist remain disabilities. Of course, some conditions are sexy, and some aren't, and some stigmas have been fully reversed to the point that the disorders have become cool, while other stigmas remain potent. But everywhere, the conversation is undergirded by the notion that disability is nothing to feel bad about.

But, in fact, disability makes people feel bad; that is what disability is. Someone who does not suffer as a result of their disability is therefore not disabled. And what we must face up to in order to confront and fix this culture of sickness that is itself sick is this: some things in life are just bad, and there is no hiding from that fact. Sickness is bad. Disability is bad. People are not bad because they are disabled, but the fact that they are disabled is bad. And if we insist on pretending otherwise, then the concept of disability can have no meaning. What's necessary is not to pretend that being blind is just another "way of being" than being sighted, but something worse, that schizophrenia is not a different "way of knowing" than being of sound mind, but something worse, that autism is not a different "way of being human" than not having autism, but something worse – or, if autism is just a different way to be a person, then it must stop being considered a disability. In this chapter I will argue that it's time to discover the concept of tragedy again, to grapple with the fact that there are things that we as humans must face up to in sorrow and pain if we are to live with them. I'll sketch a better, more mature, more humane vision of disability, one that drops the theatrics of illness-as-identity and invites disabled people to live proud and full lives free of unnecessary hindrances without centering their entire identities around their disability. I'll make the case that mental illness is bad, and then describe what should be done about it.

Afterwards: Searching for Jordan Neely

Earlier this year, a vigilante killed a mentally ill homeless man named Jordan Neely on the New York City subway. Neely, who had been acting erratically before his death but had attacked no one, had for years lived an itinerant and unstable life, falling in and out of treatment for the schizophrenia and PTSD which had been worsened when his mother was murdered and her body found stuffed in a suitcase. He had spent much of his youth as a subway performer, frequently acting as a Michael Jackson impersonator. In May of 2023, after an outburst on the subway, Neely was placed in a chokehold by a bystander and killed, causing widespread shock and a great deal of arguments about crime and mental illness. What struck me about Neely was how distinct his story was from the now-inescapable Tumblrification of mental health talk, how little the dominant self-help (and self-promotion) philosophy of psychiatry had to offer him.

In this afterwards, I'll lament Neely's demise and locate his story in a society that has left him behind. That society has long been resistant to involuntary treatment due to misguided fixation on abstract rights at the expense of health, has come to set stigma at the top of the list of his problems despite how little stigma mattered compared to his impairments, seems bent on placing the dubiously disabled at the center of the mental health conversation, and appears serially unable to consistently provide medical care to those who desperately need it. In this section, and this book, I'll discuss some of the ways Neely might have been saved, and use his specific example as a means to ground the book in its fundamental appeal: for the good of those who have truly been left behind. What does the recent fixation on stigma have to offer someone like Neely? How does the medicalization of all things help ensure that such a tragedy never happens again? In what ways did the anti-psychiatry movement make it harder to save Neely? And how can we finally expand access to reliable, assertive, evidence-based medical care for the sick and desperate like him?

This book is a statement about insanity, and the culture that surrounds it, and the society that still does not know what to do with it. And it's a prayer for Jordan Neely, invisible in our system, ignored by those who claim to speak for the disabled, and far beyond the saving of children.