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The Gap

By Christopher Shea
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The chasm between academe and the rest of America is wide – and getting wider.

There wasn't exactly a shortage of dumb things said during the impeachment hearings. Yet one group was singled out for special ridicule: the professors.

After several of them filed before the House Judiciary Committee in November to lay out the history of impeachment, the bad reviews poured in. The Weekly Standard, a conservative political journal, anointed Princeton University history professor Sean Wilentz its "Loser of the Week." (Wilentz's big sound bite had been that the representatives who voted for impeachment risked "going down in history with the zealots and the fanatics.") More moderate commentators called the 48-year-old American history specialist "gratuitously condescending" and poked fun at his haircut.

Arthur Schlesinger Jr., the 81-year-old historian and Camelot intellectual, also came in for rough treatment. Derisive hoots greeted his statements that "we all lie, all the time," and that if illicit sex were a disqualifier from office, half of America's presidents wouldn't have finished out their terms. "Great sophistication, but very little common sense," was the verdict of Rep. Bob Inglis (R-S.C.).

Committee Chairman Henry Hyde revived the cluelessness-of-the-eggheads routine before the Senate a few weeks later, referring to the "parade of professors" the House had endured and suggesting that the Senate might be in for a similar fright. "You know what an intellectual is?" he folksily asked his audience. "Someone educated beyond their intelligence." The senators responded with a collective belly laugh.

All this mockery wasn't fueled solely by partisanship-or even by outrage at the professors' partisanship. It was, instead, a manifestation of the long-standing tension between the academic world and the rest

of America. Sure, the professors' tin ears had something to do with it. Wilentz might have guessed that his impassioned harangue would grate on some nerves. But it's simply the case that the public is primed to chortle at professors. Hyde's punch lines were hanging in the air long before his tweedy opponents even stepped onstage.

The gap between the universities and mainstream culture has always been wider in America than in most Western countries. The notion that professors are hapless in the practical world is deeply entrenched, as historian Richard Hofstadter pointed out more than three decades ago in his classic book *Anti-Intellectualism in American Life*. It doesn't take much of a leap to imagine hearing today the complaint that one congressman made in 1946 when the House was voting on whether to extend government support to professors in the social sciences. According to Hofstadter's book, the congressman thundered that he didn't want to create "some sort of an organization in which there would be a lot of short-haired women and long-haired men messing into everybody's personal affairs and lives, inquiring whether they love their wives or do not love them and so forth." In a decade in which virtually no one has mentioned the word "university" except alongside the phrases "politically correct" or "tenured radicals," the culture gap may be as wide as it was 50 years ago.

A lot of people don't know what scientists do, but they are pretty sure it is important. They don't quite get what English professors do, either, aside from teach, but they are fairly certain it is nefarious. And they aren't likely to get any help from the media, outside of a few non-mainstream publications. "There's kind of an ugly Catch-22 in media-think about academe," says Carlin Romano, literary critic of the Philadelphia Inquirer and a professor at Bennington College—one of the few people who straddle the divide. "Mass media doesn't cover anything positive, anything not scandal-related, in academic culture. Therefore it doesn't know anything positive about academic culture. Finally, it concludes that the academy has no positive influence on society." No editor, he adds, ever got in trouble for missing a major trend in philosophy or anthropology.

If the mainstream press serves up a blank in its coverage of subjects like English, philosophy, history and the social sciences, right-wing pundits take up the slack. They encourage the disconnect. Take former National Endowment for the Humanities Chairman Lynne Cheney's continual complaints that humanities

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professors have betrayed the Enlightenment and practically keep busts of Lenin on their desks,; mix in the economic lure of a booming economy, and the result is a recipe for the irrelevance of the liberal arts. Is it any wonder that more and more students are thinking: Hello, network technician certificate; no thanks to Thucydides, Ben Jonson and Wittgenstein? Students may be inclined to skirt the culture wars by skirting culture.

It's hard to measure the effects of the disparagement of the liberal arts and the attraction of more "practical" endeavors, but Indiana University's experience with its College of Arts and Sciences may offer a hint. The college has seen a 20 percent drop in enrollment in recent years. Last year, in desperation, it resorted to an alarmist advertising campaign that poked fun at the pre-professional route: "Okay then. Live your dreams in your next life." And: "Yeah, like your parents are so happy." The ads were illustrated with images of drones in business suits. When the cultural conservative Roger Kimball snapped that the ads placed the "dignity and integrity" of the liberal arts at stake, the advertising agency had a pretty good comeback: "When enrollment drops 20 percent, what's at stake is the future of the liberal arts."

My own nominee for low point in the interactions between academia and the public would be a "60 Minutes" segment that aired in March 1998, on the subject of "queer studies." Queer studies is not a subject your parents majored in. It could be described as a growing, controversial academic field devoted to analyzing evolving concepts of homosexuality, heterosexuality and gender differences in history and literature. It was subtly characterized by the fair-minded crew at "60 Minutes," however, as "the explosion of college courses dealing with deviant, offbeat sex and homosexuality." Yikes.

"60 Minutes" must have found the academic work not only controversial but hard going, because rather than examine anyone's scholarship in detail, it patched together a bizarre, alarming collage of explicit sex-ed classes, gay and transgendered student groups, and a handful of interviews with actual professors. Throughout, Mike Wallace grimaced as if he were having a bunion removed.

Viewers were supposed to recoil at the mere mention of course titles like this one, from Stanford University: "Homosexuals, Heretics, Witches and Werewolves: Deviants in Medieval Society." Wallace asked what the difference was between these courses and informal "rap sessions" on sex. (Nothing, I suppose-if your rap sessions happen to include discussion of the social structure of Europe in 1300.) "60 Minutes" even slapped a parental warning on the show.

Queer studies, of course, is a subject ripe for attack-one so tempting

that it is almost unfair to criticize the journalists who go for the cheap shot. The field's marginalization, in fact, is a point of pride; alienation from mainstream life, as Hofstadter noted, is always a tempting refuge for intellectuals in America.

Contrary to reputation, however, most academics don't want to retreat to Gothic enclaves to exchange insights in impenetrable jargon. At least not always. Professors in such fields as history, sociology and English have been grappling lately with the question of whether they have become too insular-and, if so, what to do about it. They wonder: Is it them? Is it us?

Consider history. It might seem strange to say that history is disconnected from the public, since, in some respects, it has never been more popular, as the 40 million who tuned in for Ken Burns's "Civil War" series and the million-plus who schlepped home with David McCullough's cement-block-size biography of Harry S. Truman could attest. There's a catch, though, explains Edward Ayers, a professor of history at the University of Virginia and author of *The Promise of the New South*.

The popular history books, says Ayers, tend to be celebratory biographies or narrow tales like Stephen Ambrose's book on Lewis and Clark, *Undaunted Courage*. "The most interesting work historians do seldom makes it to the general public," he says, "and the best-selling history books have almost no impact on the profession. That's not a healthy phenomenon for a democratic society."

The theoretically sophisticated and incredibly specialized-or, depending upon your taste, statistics-laden and jargony-work done by some historians today has made the writing of scholarly yet accessible books more of a challenge than it used to be. Some professors and graduate students believe that the field has stopped trying. In 1994, 74 percent of graduate students felt that the profession discriminated against scholars who tried to write books their Aunt Mabel could understand. James McPherson, a Princeton University professor who wrote the Pulitzer Prize-winning *Battle Cry of Freedom*, has written that some historians subtly snubbed him after that book sold hundreds of thousands of copies. Norman Cantor, a professor of history at New York University whose books on the Middle Ages sell modestly well, says, "The younger generation of academics is more resentful of people who write for the trade presses. It could be because they have their noses to the grindstone, but I don't think so. I think it's because the historical profession has gotten narrower in the last 15 years."

Virginia's Ayers believes that subtle antiacademic sentiment on the part of book reviewers and editors plays a part in widening the gap

between professors and the public. "I'm on the lookout for it," he says. "If a nonacademic wrote the book, they will say it's 'refreshingly free of jargon.' If an academic wrote it, they will write, 'Amazingly enough, even though it's written by a professor, it's interesting.' You can't win. In history, the debate over reaching out to the public is a long-running one. As long ago as 1938, after vitriolic argument, the American Historical Association voted down a plan to publish a magazine for lay people. (A rump group later started American Heritage.) In contrast, sociology's falling out of public favor is both more sudden and more complete. The lack of respect accorded the field by the press and policymakers has caused a spasm of self-reflection.

In the 1960s and '70s, sociology was celebrated as the tool that would unravel some of society's most vexing social problems. So high-profile were the field's authorities that novelist Malcolm Bradbury even wrote a satire of a pompous sociologist who thought he could save the world through social science. Today, as the British magazine *Prospect* recently noted, "A satire of sociology wouldn't be worth writing."

It's a rare bookstore in which you will even find a sociology section anymore. And sociologists watch, piqued, as major policy changes on their turf, like the recent welfare overhaul, take place without their input. "Welfare reform was not a research-based social change," laments Barbara Risman, a sociologist at North Carolina State University and the editor of *Contemporary Sociology*, the main book-review journal in the field. "The people who studied welfare for 10 years were not the people who were part of making a decision."

In a dozen or so articles in *Contemporary Sociology* in the past year, Risman and other sociologists have taken up the issue of why sociologists can't get their insights across. In one issue, Harvard's William Julius Wilson, whose 1997 book on urban poverty, *When Work Disappears*, was widely reviewed and discussed, wrote that clean prose and a media blitz can still produce results. On his book tour, he did seven interviews a day. (It should be added that the influence on policy of the book, which called for massive government investment in public works, was roughly zero.) In another issue, Peter Rossi, professor emeritus from the University of Massachusetts, recounted how a groundbreaking study he had conducted on homelessness in Chicago got boiled down, in the press, to a specious "controversy" between him and advocates for the homeless. His scientific estimates of the number of people without shelter were lower than the advocates' guesses. The ginned-up debate raged for weeks, with the descriptive scholarship and policy proposals forgotten.

What might be called the Hillary Clinton conspiracy theory is a common theme in contemporary sociology. "There are a whole bunch of right-wing think tanks that are very good at publicity," says Risman. "Research-based sociology has not been as successful at getting their views across."

More conservative sociologists, like Rutgers University's David Popenoe, argue that it simply isn't the case that conservatives are especially cagey and effective at public relations. They suggest, instead, that as society has drifted farther to the right in the past couple of decades, the traditionally "progressive" assumptions of sociology seem more dated and extreme. Or, politicians may just think they still know better than those long-haired men and short-haired women.

Within the field of literature, professors' attention has been turned sharply inward because of professional concerns—chiefly, the dismal job prospects of graduate students—to the point where reaching the public is hardly even on the radar screen. Over half of all scholars in English who received PhDs from 1991 to 1995 failed to land full-time, tenure-track jobs. The advice from last year's president of the Modern Language Association, Princeton's Elaine Showalter—namely, that there is a world of opportunity outside universities—only enraged the graduate students. Most don't see their education as useful for anything except teaching—the gap between the academy and the traditional job market appears so large that they can't imagine making the leap. "There are some people who think you aren't a human being unless you are a professor," says Mark Edmundson, a professor of English at the University of Virginia. "If we stopped telling them that, maybe they would stop believing it."

As for scholarship in English, after the controversies over arcane literary theories like deconstruction in the 1980s, interest in literary criticism has dropped back to its previous level: negligible. Academic publishers have difficulty getting even university libraries to buy lit-crit books these days.

We tend to accept the gap between universities and the public as a fact of life, but it's not necessarily so. In London, for example, humanities professors pop up in print and on the tube to review movies, TV, even the Princess Diana phenomenon. The longtime editor in chief of London's Times Literary Supplement left a few years ago to become the chairman of the English department at the University of Warwick. (Just try to imagine Tina Brown chairing Columbia's English department.) Not only is there a thicker wall between journalists and academics in the States, but journalists who write about academia here have proved to be some of academia's harshest critics—animated, in part, by resentment of what they see as

the cushier lives of professors (although the job figures for English PhDs would seem to prove otherwise).

Public discourse is impoverished by not having long-term, scholarly perspectives included. Moreover, academics themselves are hampered by their isolation. It breeds bad prose and a penchant for fence-sitting-which, in a vicious circle, turns off potential readers. Communicating with the public "is really good for me as a writer," says Princeton's Showalter, who has moonlighted as a television critic for People magazine, written about her love of *haute couture* for Vogue and reviewed movies for the BBC. "There are requirements that are very useful for an academic to have, like meeting deadlines and having opinions. Academics don't want to say what they think. They prefer to say what Derrida thinks."

Columbia University's Edward Said, who succeeded Showalter as president of the Modern Language Association, recently blamed obscure, turgid writing for the "diminishment and incoherence" of literary studies.

Professors' arguments would improve if they had to test them before the widest possible audience, suggests the Philadelphia Inquirer's Romano. "When intellectuals take their ideas to the mass market, they are not just doing a good deed for the mass market," he says. "They are doing a good deed for themselves. The mass marketplace of ideas proves to be a better critic of big assumptions in any field than is the specialized discipline, or one's peers."

The profile of liberal arts professors is so low now that it is possible to encounter them only in one's college years. One university-one of the few that is directly in tune with the American ethos of hard-nosed practicality and common sense-makes it possible to avoid them altogether. This pragmatic institution is the University of Phoenix, a for-profit institution spreading like kudzu across the country. It has dispensed entirely with tenured professors and the liberal arts. Its bland corporate offices are in Phoenix, but it has branches in 14 states and enrolls 56,000 students. Its professors are businesspeople who teach practical courses after hours, and the students are adults with full-time jobs who want to exchange cash for useful knowledge-not ponder great works.

Phoenix's president, Jorge Klor de Alva, is a turncoat from the elite world of liberal arts. Until last year he was a professor of ethnic studies and anthropology at the University of California at Berkeley-a true academic star. When I spoke with him last summer, as he was settling into his job in Arizona, he characterized his move, in part, as a reaction against the self-referential, politically correct theorizing in the top liberal arts departments. He wanted to give working-class

students a more substantial education to take back to their community, one that would help them in their jobs.

Klor de Alva is an eloquent pitchman, and the University of Phoenix surely provides a useful service to some students. For all the complaints about clueless, arrogant, pedantic professors, however, and all the tension between the public and the ivory tower, most Americans probably don't want their children's universities to look like the University of Phoenix. And one thing is certain: The elites who are most clamorous in the bashing of liberal arts professors won't be sending their own kids to stripped-down colleges like Phoenix.

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