

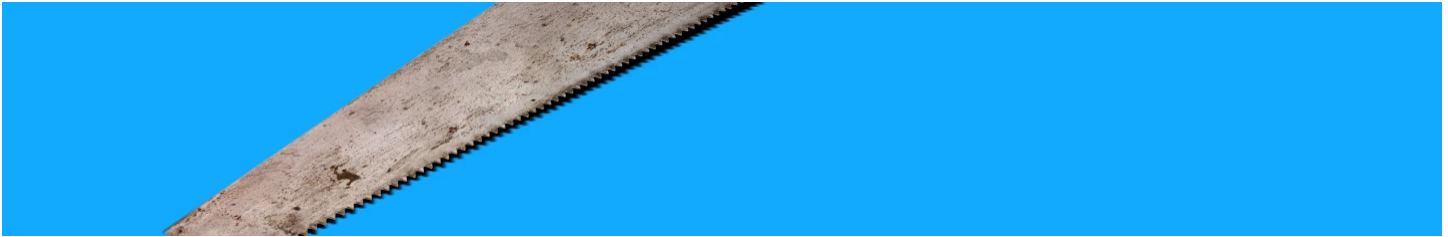


Are Leftist Professors Really Destroying the Academy's Credibility?

No, despite what a recent report argues.



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THE REVIEW | OPINION

By [Agustín Fuentes](#)

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The chancellors of Washington University in St. Louis and Vanderbilt University recently commissioned a “[Report on the State of Scholarship in the Humanities and the Humanistic Social Sciences](#).” The chair of the report, the New York University philosopher Paul Boghossian, assembled a team of 10 scholars, and their report states that the core problem facing the social sciences and humanities is “a distinctive form of politicization in which the scholarly enterprise is taken to be subordinate to, or in the service of, political (social or moral) goals beyond the advancement of knowledge and understanding.” The report asserts that this position is generally associated with scholars on the “progressive left,” and that the discipline of anthropology is perhaps the worst offender.

According to the report, anthropology is characterized by “a widespread deterioration in scholarly standards grounded in a pervasive repudiation of ideals of objectivity together with a toxic intellectual climate in which reasonable dissent on politically charged topics is routinely suppressed and punished.” This is quite a claim, and yet readers are left wondering how the commission arrived at such a determination.

From reading the report, an anthropologist like myself might well assume they conducted a DOGE-esque word search to find certain disfavored concepts among a selection of scholarly journal articles and conference proceedings, and relied exclusively on a small subset of critics of anthropology, combined with the opinion of the one anthropologist in their group to shape their argument. A similar [methodology](#) was recently employed by researchers at the Progressive Policy Institute [to critique](#) the field of American studies. Scholarly challenge and epistemological debate are important parts of the academy. But this report is neither.

The commission states they arrived at their conclusion by examining the disciplines of philosophy, anthropology, sociology, history, literary studies, and music studies. They compiled “detailed internal reports” on each of these disciplines, attempting “a fair assessment of the disciplines” by examining, “where possible,” existing academic work. They do admit that their findings and conclusions are mostly “not yet supported by the kind of quantitative evidence that would be expected in a peer-reviewed study of these matters” — thus explicitly noting that their report does not reflect any full, methodologically defined quantitative or comparative analyses.

The report's key assertion is that leftist scholars are letting their ideological commitments override their scholarly commitment to veracity, causing deterioration in the social sciences and humanities. And they are doing so via an emphasis on "antiracism (the eradication of racial hierarchy), feminism (the rejection of patriarchy), the 'decolonization' of the academy and of society more generally (undoing the legacy of imperialism)" and their quest to push for "full equity for gender and sexual minorities."

The report warns that these disciplines, especially anthropology, show clear signs of "a deterioration in scholarly standards fueled by the substitution of political criteria for properly scholarly criteria in the assessment of research and a more general repudiation of long-standing ideals of rigor and objectivity."

One first must ask the authors of the report: What is this "anthropology" you are talking about?

I ask that question because the report cites anthropologists sparingly, and those whom they do cite represent a teeny slice of the discipline. Anthropology is a composite discipline with substantive diversity in theory, method, and praxis. It is by no means an intellectually uniform field, and, in fact, has multiple traditions or schools (North American, European, Latin American, etc.). For example, in the North American tradition (ostensibly the focus of the report) anthropology encompasses the subfields of sociocultural anthropology, archaeological anthropology, biological anthropology, linguistic anthropology, and applied anthropology, each of which is further divided into multiple theoretical and topical specialties. Furthermore, different regional and national traditions of anthropology differ in these subarea constellations. Each of the major subareas overlap and much scholarship is interdisciplinary, with anthropologists collaborating across subdisciplines and with other allied fields.

Far from being static or hegemonic, anthropology is filled with vigorous and ongoing debates about theory, evidence, ethics, method, and public engagement. The future of the discipline itself is a constant source of debate, discourse, and assessment. To characterize anthropology as a monolithic entity "in which reasonable dissent on politically charged topics is routinely suppressed and punished," and to do so via idiosyncratic selections of citations and quotations, is a highly suspect approach, and one might argue, an ideologically driven project.

The report states that humanistic disciplines are in trouble: "It is, of course, widely recognized that undergraduate enrollments in these disciplines have plummeted and that there have been numerous complaints about the content of syllabi." But how accurate is that claim? To drill down on just my field of anthropology: According to a [survey](#) from the American Academy of Arts & Sciences, 59 percent of anthropology department chairs "thought undergraduate enrollments had held steady or increased" from the fall of 2020 to the fall of 2023. Only 20 percent of department chairs were pessimistic about the future of the field at their institution. The notion of a wave of dissatisfied students fleeing the discipline is not borne out by this data.

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The report is rife with misleading assertions. Let's zoom in on two of the examples the report offers as evidence that "political goals distort the scholarly enterprise" — both are in biological anthropology and have to do with biology, sex, and behavior, areas in which I work.

First, the report brings up a 2023 [paper](#) from the journal *PLoS One*: "The Myth of Man the Hunter: Women's contribution to the hunt across ethnographic contexts" and argues that it represents the politicization of, and a serious deterioration in, the scholarly quality of discussions around the sexual division of labor and hunting. To demonstrate this and disprove the paper's position (that hunting is a complex behavioral and ecological dynamic and not a unisex activity across human evolution and human societies), they cite a single [critique](#) of that paper and nod to their "internal report" as evidence. (They did not cite the [correction](#) published by the original paper's authors addressing the critique.) In framing the debate this way, they ignore the literature and the [diversity of perspectives](#) and debate on [hunting](#) and the sexual division of labor in humans past and present. Their assertion of politicization and subpar scholarly practice relies on a one-sided engagement with one article and ignores substantial literature in human evolution, human biology, archaeology, and biological anthropology.

Later in the report, the authors commit a similarly gross oversimplification in an argument around academic "distortion." They write:

If scholars committed to social justice believe that the cause can only be advanced by finding, for example, that there are no behavioral differences between men and women traceable to biology, they will be under enormous pressure from their own commitments and from their colleagues to find no such differences. Either the research will not be done, or if it is done and the results look bad, the finding will be suppressed or the evidence reinterpreted so as to obscure it. ... When whole disciplines or subdisciplines prejudge substantive questions on political grounds ... the upshot can be a serious distortion of the scholarly enterprise.

Asserting that "there are no behavioral differences between men and women traceable to biology" is not a

belief, goal, or claim made by any biological anthropologists or other anthropologists who work in this area that I am aware of. It is certainly not made by any of the biological anthropologists named in the report. Instead of making up a hypothetical, misleading example, the report's authors could have easily read and cited books or articles by biological anthropologists, or any number of peer-reviewed scholarly arguments for rejecting absolutist binary views of sex in human biology. The report could have nodded to the deep literature on gender and gender/sex in sociocultural or linguistic anthropology, say, or bioarchaeology, and found a diversity of voices and scholarly arguments in this realm even within anthropology. But they did not.

The report also errs on sex and gender in a footnote pertaining to their allegation that "settled science" is often "totally exaggerated." The authors write:

One clear example of this phenomenon is the treatment of biological sex in many areas of the humanities and social sciences. Throughout these areas it is widely held that biological sex in humans is not a 'binary' but rather a continuum, divisions in which are ultimately arbitrary, *and that settled science has established this so securely that any attempt to treat biological sex as an independent (binary) variable reveals a dubious political agenda on the part of the researcher.*

They do not meaningfully develop this assertion; all they do is nod to a conference session that was [canceled](#) in 2023. If they had, I and many of my colleagues would be logical scholars to cite, but that would require getting the framing and context correct. None of us, as far as I know, who propose that sex is not best envisioned as a binary system argue that there are no divisions, that there are no sexes, or that all such divisions are arbitrary. Nor is the majority of our work focused on political impacts. In fact, [as much research has made clear](#), it is the types of division and the patterns of continuity and difference that are key factors in arguing that sex is complex and that there are substantial limits to using an absolute binary frame when discussing biological (and social) dynamics of sex.

Instead of unpacking this, the report once again invents an extreme position and asserts that it is hegemonically held by leftist social scientists and humanists and politically enforced by our disciplines. The picture the report draws is not representative of the actual academic discourse, and asking a reader to believe the report's assertions just because the authors say they are true is the definition of an ideological argument.

I highlight these above cases as they are in my area of scholarship and I know them well, but they are only a snippet from a range of charges in the report that [use quotes](#) and other assertions in a misleading or simply incorrect manner. For example, the report selectively quotes from a [two-page commentary](#) published by a junior biological anthropologist not once, but twice. Yes, the scholar wrote that,

The core academic value of anthropology is not the pursuit of truth, because all truth is subjective.

Conversely, there are millions of people who are adversely affected by the subjective version of truth we choose to tell. That is the objective reality, and so *our* core value should instead be to serve *their* interests.

But this quote has to be read in the larger context of the short commentary in which the young anthropologist was writing in response to the “Letter of Concern,” circulated by a group of anthropologists unhappy with the content of an American Anthropological Association presidential address (the same one that the report also quotes from). At the core of this discourse are discussions of anthropological ethics around communities, data, and how anthropology should serve Global South communities. So rather than being an example of the suppression of discourse or rejection of objectivity as the report claims, it’s actually an example of a healthy back and forth within the discipline. The author of the short commentary focuses on population genetics specializing in human prehistory, and their work lies at the crossroad of empirical genetics and simulation-based methods. Rather than an argument from a radical anthropologist who rejects empiricism, as the report implies, the commentary is a contribution from an empirically grounded scientist.

In this same vein the report offers [a quote](#) from the past American Anthropological Association president who stimulated the response above, suggesting that scholars view anthropology’s political project as “to challenge the culturally dominant commonsense of capitalist consumerism.” But similarly elevating the views of other presidents, past and current, could lead one to think anthropology is narrowly focused on how [biology matters for human cultures](#), or on the [pedagogical nuances](#) of free speech and academic freedom, or the [lessons of Hannah Arendt and Bertolt Brecht](#). Such selection bias helps support the report’s [caricature of relativism](#), positionality, and reflexivity as epistemological tools. I’ll leave it to readers to decide for themselves.

Given all of these issues, one recommendation of the report is cause for serious concern. It states:

We have identified problems in the humanities and social sciences to which administrators should be alert. ... If administrators are concerned about these problems in their universities, an indispensable first step will be an intensive study of the units in question conducted by reliably broad-minded disciplinary experts (in-house and external) and by experts in adjacent disciplines who take the problems seriously and can be relied on to take a measured view.

This is a pretty clear call for universities to conduct ideological reviews of certain types of departments, anthropology foremost among them. It is politely worded McCarthyism, precisely the kind of ideological attack and censure that scholars have pushed back against for generations. I am sure that all the authors of this report would agree that academic freedom and intellectual honesty (and humility) are the cornerstones of the academy. And yet they make this thinly veiled threat to their colleagues in contradiction of those values.

It's clear that much of what the report presents as social-justice scholarship are primarily epistemologies and other disciplinary dynamics that the authors of the report don't like. Yes, there are certainly issues around the perceptions of declining trust in higher education and a range of pressures facing academics and the academy. But the underlying dynamics of these issues are not simple, their origins are not uni-causal, nor can they be separated from the broader societal dynamics in which they are enmeshed. In fact, contemporary epistemologies, practices, and innovations characterizing anthropology (and much in the social sciences and humanities) are excellent tools to be harnessed in navigating these many and complex challenges we face.

In the current moment the academy is being subjected to an order to make all federal funding of science coincide with White House priorities and beliefs, a full-frontal attack on the social sciences, humanities, and academic freedom by the federal government, the censoring of syllabi by state governments, and attacks by private foundations and billionaires. Academic freedom and higher education as a public good are at risk. It is in this context that the authors of this report, and presumably the two university chancellors who commissioned it, want the academy to turn its focus and energy to the threat posed by the bogeyman of social-justice scholarship.

This is not where we need to be putting our time, energy, and effort. There are more significant and urgent crises in the academy, as well as in the world. We in the academy don't all have to get along or like every mode of scholarship, or every scholar, but we do have to teach and learn, to explore the landscapes of knowledge and experience and attempt to draw insight and practical (and impractical) applications from them. Humanity is in the midst of a polycrisis and the work of the academy is critical to resolving it. So, rather than panicking about the disciplinary epistemologies a few chancellors might not like or starting internal investigations into colleagues' academic departments, we should focus on doing what we can to make the academy and the world safer, better informed, and more just.

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