

## Scholasticism: Causes and Cures

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### Introduction

The claim that faculty conduct research is one of the main justifications for the modern university. Supposedly, academe carries out important, cutting-edge inquiries in which society has an interest. In fact, research at American universities is becoming narrow and artificial, out of touch with social realities and of interest mainly to other academics. This development I call scholasticism, after the medieval philosophers whom we remember—perhaps unfairly—as being similarly ingrown.

In recent decades, conservative critics of academe have focused on political correctness—the tendency of academics to privilege liberal perspectives to the exclusion of conservative ones. But scholasticism may pose a greater threat to the heart of university life, which is the intelligent construction of arguments. Rather than address important issues thoughtfully, today's academics are becoming pedants, mostly writing only for other specialists. Scholasticism is squeezing the intellectual life out of academe, and driving it toward other venues, including government and the blogosphere.

In a previous article in the Winter 2010 *Academic Questions*, I described what scholasticism means and documented its growth, based mainly on my own discipline, political science.<sup>1</sup> I mean by the term four developments in research:

- *Specialization*: Compared to several decades ago, academics today tend to work on narrower subjects and interact only with other specialists in their fields.

<sup>1</sup>Lawrence M. Mead, “The Other Danger... Scholasticism in Academic Research,” *Academic Questions* 23, no. 4 (Winter 2010): 404–19.

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- *Methodologism*: Today's researchers are far more self-conscious about the procedures of inquiry, often focusing on method to the exclusion of substance.
- *Nonempiricism*: In part due to methodologism, today's research often has little evidence behind it, and some mathematical modeling is not empirically tested at all.
- *Literature focus*: Today's scholars typically focus heavily on the past research in their specialty, taking their questions from it rather than from their own appraisal of reality.

Of these trends, specialization is the most fundamental and the easiest to document. One sign of it is growth in the number of journals. In political science, there was only one journal in 1886, but there are forty-two today, many of them specialized. In 1981, the American Political Science Association (APSA) allowed "sections" for different specialties to organize, and since then thirty-five have formed.<sup>2</sup> The annual APSA conference has similarly become fragmented by specialty.

To document all the trends, I coded articles in the *American Political Science Review*, the leading journal in political science, at ten-year intervals over 1968 to 2007, for whether they showed the four scholastic features. Over that period, there was a sharp increase in specialization and literature focus and a lesser rise in nonempiricism. Methodologism fell slightly, probably because I defined it restrictively. Rising scholasticism, interestingly, was not confined to fields that commonly use mathematics, such as multivariate statistics or rational choice; it advanced in all fields, even those, like political theory, that seldom use these methods.<sup>3</sup>

Thus, today's political science research is increasingly aimed at minor issues within narrow specialties that are largely invisible to the discipline as a whole, let alone to the wider public. I have heard and read of similar trends in other disciplines, not only in the social sciences and humanities but in the physical sciences. Today's academic research serves values of *rigor* derived from the "hard" sciences—the idea that inferences must be definitely provable and replicable. But to achieve rigor researchers subdivide inquiry into tiny subjects, leading to results that are often trivial or unrealistic. They

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<sup>2</sup>The self-importance of these "sections" is suggested by the fact that, in the 2010 APSA conference program, fourteen pages were devoted to awards given by the association or its sections—for best paper at the previous conference, best dissertation, best article, best book, and career achievement. Many sections gave several awards and some had difficulty finding candidates.

<sup>3</sup>For details of this analysis, see my "Scholasticism in Political Science," *Perspectives on Politics* 8, no. 2 (June 2010): 457–59.

neglect the values of *relevance*—addressing problems that concern the outside world, and where there is an audience beyond the researchers themselves. Although these trends dominate published research, they are unpopular within political science. That helps to explain the “perestroika” movement, a recent rebellion by traditionalists against the influence of rational choice (the use of game theory and economic models to analyze political behavior).<sup>4</sup>

Having described the rise of scholasticism, I ask in this article about causes and cures: Why has obscurantism mushroomed in recent decades, and what can be done about it? I rely mostly on the trends I have seen in my own department and at New York University over more than thirty years, but again my impressions are that the problem afflicts other departments and schools as well.

### **The Exhaustion of Research**

The most fundamental cause of scholasticism is the exhaustion of inquiry. In any field, only so many important findings are possible. Once these have been made, there is less for later scholars to discover. The research university, going back to its origins in Germany in the nineteenth century, privileges research that is “original,” where the findings are unprecedented. So to have anything new to say, researchers must pursue ever narrower and more obscure subjects.

To give just one example from political science, it has been clear since the first systematic public opinion research in the early 1960s that American voters do not meet the presuppositions of participatory politics. In theory, citizens are engaged in politics and knowledgeable about its issues. But surveys showed that most voters know little about politics and government and care less. Only a bare majority even votes. And what attachments people have to politics are largely nonrational. Most vote largely on the basis of party allegiance, a loyalty formed early in life and seldom changed later.<sup>5</sup> An ocean of later research has failed to shake these conclusions. At most, details have shifted as political conditions change.

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<sup>4</sup>Jonathan Cohn, “Irrational Exuberance: When Did Political Science Forget About Politics?” *The New Republic*, October 25, 1999, 25–32.

<sup>5</sup>Angus Campbell et al., *The American Voter* (New York: John Wiley, 1960).

Research is exhausted more quickly if more scholars pursue a subject. One reason for scholastic trends, therefore, is simply the vast expansion of the universities in recent decades. There are now thousands of colleges and universities across the United States, employing some 860,000 full-time faculty.<sup>6</sup> This has expanded all the academic disciplines. Legions of scholars of all kinds are now seeking original findings in their fields. They have left few stones unturned.

The pressure to specialize weighs heaviest on graduate students seeking the Ph.D. and an academic job. The universities have an interest in generating more doctorates, because graduate students and post-docs provide the labor needed to teach classes and staff research projects cheaply. But few of these students can hope to get full-time tenure-track positions. Between 2005 and 2007, American universities awarded 101,009 doctoral degrees but hired only 15,820 assistant professors.<sup>7</sup> Those odds put remorseless pressure on students to publish early—even before they finish their degrees—if they are even to get an interview for a junior appointment, let alone to receive it, let alone to get tenure. That drives students toward the highly specialized, methodological research that is now in vogue.

The same pressure generates more and more journals. Publishers constantly create new periodicals serving new specialties because they know desperate academics will submit papers to them and they can then try to sell the new publications to university libraries.<sup>8</sup> In 1981, the total number of journals was already enormous—74,000—but by 2003 it was 172,000, or more than twice as great.<sup>9</sup> In a sense, the proliferation of journals makes publishing easier, because there are more outlets where papers may be accepted. The more obscure outlets have to solicit submissions. But the journals are mostly specialized, so the price of publishing is to pursue narrow subjects.

Given the exhaustion of research, there is intellectual value in synthetic work that pulls together disparate findings to create overviews of subjects. A

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<sup>6</sup>Andrew Hacker and Claudia Dreifus, *Higher Education? How Colleges Are Wasting Our Money and Failing Our Kids—And What We Can Do About It* (New York: Times Books, 2010), 15.

<sup>7</sup>*Ibid.*, 56–57. The overproduction of the Ph.D. is rife in Europe as well. See, “The Disposable Academic,” *The Economist*, December 18, 2010, 156–58.

<sup>8</sup>For example, in 2005 I received an announcement from Cambridge University Press for the *International Journal of Cultural Property*. It publishes papers about “cultural property, cultural heritage, and related issues.” The subject is totally obscure to me.

<sup>9</sup>Stanley W. Trimble et al., “The Glut of Academic Publishing: A Call for a New Culture,” *Academic Questions* 23, no. 3 (Fall 2010): 277.

fair amount of this is done, but it commands less prestige than the unearthing of obscure new findings. In recent decades, for example, histories of the American founding and biographies of the leading founders have become popular, but that demand has been met almost entirely by writers outside the university. Academe could not respond because, as Gordon Wood notes, “Academic historians now write almost exclusively for one another and focus on the issues and debates within the discipline.”<sup>10</sup>

The Achilles heel of scholastic research is its miniscule audience. In all science and social science journals from 2002 through 2006, only 41 percent of the articles were cited in the five years after publication. Most articles published in the *American Political Science Review* are rarely if ever cited at all.<sup>11</sup> The irony is that books are probably easier to get published than articles in leading journals, yet they have a wider audience. That may be because, in the nature of a book, the argument is larger and evokes broader interest than narrow journal articles, even the best. In an academic world where “original” research is usually so trivial, the greatest problem is not to get published—it is to get read.

### Research over Teaching

A further reason for the expansion and fragmentation of research is that relatively more academics today, compared to the past, are expected to do research. Success in research, as certified by publications, utterly dominates how academics are assessed. That is true even at second-rank institutions seeking to move up. Formerly, faculty at ambitious schools were rewarded for publishing, but teaching ability and administrative service (for instance, chairing a department) was also valued. All three factors were considered when junior scholars were reviewed for tenure. After tenure, it was common for professors to write little more and to content themselves with courses and committee work.

Today, in contrast, tenure turns almost entirely on a candidate’s publications. Numbers of articles in leading journals are crucial. Little attention is paid to what the articles say; the arguments are typically obscure and of little interest to outsiders. All that matters is the number of times a

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<sup>10</sup>Gordon S. Wood, “The Real Washington at Last,” *New York Review of Books*, December 9, 2010, 38–39.

<sup>11</sup>Trimble et al., “Glut of Academic Publishing,” Lee Sigelman, “Top Twenty Commentaries: The *American Political Science Review* Citations Classics,” *American Political Science Review* 100, no. 4 (November 2006): 667.

scholar has successfully run the gauntlet to get a paper accepted, especially by exclusive journals. Prominent articles count more than books because they are more competitive, even though their readership is tiny. As a result, journal editors utterly control the future of junior scholars.

Just as important, the pressure to publish no longer stops with tenure. While administrators cannot fire tenured professors, they can hold them accountable in lesser ways, and they do. Formerly, annual pay raises were much the same for all members of a department or awarded based on rank or seniority. Today, much of the rating for raises rests on publications alone—in my department, 60 percent. Teaching loads may also be reduced for faculty who publish regularly, and increased for those who do not.<sup>12</sup> Academics have learned to generate as many articles out of their research as possible. The “minimum publishable unit” is the smallest amount of research that can justify an additional article.<sup>13</sup>

The rising stress on research is a response to criticism that tenured academics are unaccountable. By continuing to rate faculty based on output, colleges may seem to enforce productivity. The usual criticism is that this pressure distracts faculty from teaching.<sup>14</sup> My point here is that there are intellectual costs as well. Although all professors may claim to do research, few are creative at it. What they produce under pressure will rarely be authentic or important. Rather, it will hew to established specialties and thus entrench scholasticism.

## Peer Review

A further force behind scholasticism is peer review. All through their careers, academics are supposed to be assessed by other academics. They get appointed because an academic department chooses them. They publish in journals only if blind reviewers approve their work. Most importantly, they receive tenure only if established scholars from their field approve their record. The need to pass peer review at all these stages is the reason why academic positions are prestigious.

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<sup>12</sup>I get no credit for my extensive outside fundraising and government involvement. Nevertheless, I have done reasonably well on raises due to publications alone, and I have routinely received a reduced teaching load.

<sup>13</sup>The research for my *Government Matters: Welfare Reform in Wisconsin* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004) generated a dozen journal articles, few of which added much to the book.

<sup>14</sup>Hacker and Dreifus, *Higher Education*, chap. 5.

By itself, peer review might cut for or against scholasticism. Everything depends on who the “peers” are. Reviewers could defend the values of relevance over those of rigor, as explained above. They could insist that researchers take on questions important outside the university, and they could favor work likely to draw an audience. My sense is that several decades ago, they often did this. Books counted more than articles, and for a book to be widely reviewed was prestigious. But to assess for tenure in this spirit took reviewers who were not themselves scholastics, who took a broad view of significant problems and methods. Such scholars are dying off.

More recently, peer review has seemed to reflect rising scholasticism—and to exacerbate it. Journal reviewers are now usually specialists in the subject that a paper addresses. They usually ask only if the author is technically proficient in the methods used in that specialty. They seldom focus on the paper’s argument, let alone its broader significance. Above all, they defend the literature. Reviewers demand that research address questions arising from past research and use methods accepted there. Editors usually defer to the reviewers, exercising little independent judgment, in part because they are often overwhelmed with submissions. In the contest between rigor and relevance, rigor has triumphed.

I have seen this shift over my own career. Early in my research, in the 1980s, I did unorthodox studies arguing that whether the poor worked depended mainly on public authority—whether they were expected to work by welfare and other social programs—and not on economic conditions as other scholars said. My methods and my dismissal of past research raised questions, yet reviewers praised the significance of the argument. These papers were published with little change.<sup>15</sup> More recently, however, an ambitious study I did of welfare politics in Congress was rejected by a string of journals. Reviewers were more specialized than I had faced earlier. They made no serious criticisms, but they largely ignored my argument, picked at details, and complained that I had slighted the literature. Editors deferred to them. The paper was finally published only when an editor became more involved and endorsed the paper without further reviews.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>15</sup>These were studies of welfare work programs that combined field research and statistical analysis. They were published as articles and eventually formed part of my first book, *Beyond Entitlement: The Social Obligation of Citizenship* (New York: Free Press, 1986), the main work for which I was given tenure in 1985.

<sup>16</sup>Lawrence M. Mead, “Welfare Politics in Congress,” *PS: Political Science & Politics* 44, no. 2 (April 2011): 345–56. Admittedly, the rejections came from the leading political science journals, which are probably more competitive than the public policy journals where I published most of my earlier work.

In tenure reviews, outside reviewers used to concentrate as much on the intellectual quality of candidates as on their publications. They queried the record to judge whether these scholars could make an important contribution to political science, not simply to their immediate subject. Would their ideas become widely known and influential? To answer such questions, some reviewers were usually drawn from outside the candidate's specialty. Even positive reviews were critical and arms-length. My own reviewers for tenure, in 1985, included senior scholars in American politics and policy who had themselves written visible and wide-ranging books about these subjects.

More recently, however, candidates demand to be reviewed by other specialists like themselves, and this demand is granted. In a balkanized political science, to impose wider perspectives is seen as unfair. Specialist reviewers ask only if the candidates have published enough and have shown technical proficiency. The methods or assumptions used go largely unquestioned, because they are orthodox to the field. Candidates are assessed, that is, as technicians and not as philosophers. Such reviewers are too narrow to judge the larger significance of the work. They laud candidates as important figures even when they are invisible to all but a handful of similar specialists.

Reviewers are unlikely to be very critical, since specialties are small; the reviewers usually know the candidates personally from conferences, and they are essentially reviewing themselves. The earlier dispassionate tone has been replaced by advocacy. Review letters now resemble the letters academic advisors write for protégés when they go on the academic job market. Reviewers are not critics of the candidate so much as allies in the struggle to get tenure for one more of their own, as against scholars in other specialties.

Facing such narrow assessment, aspiring academics today are forced to immerse themselves in a specialty and raise no questions about it. Few could dare to challenge the orthodoxy as I did. By a Darwinian process, peer review has produced junior academics adapted to its demands—harshly specialized, expert chiefly in methods, able to talk about little else, and philosophers in name only. They no longer know how to construct a full argument, since they borrow so much from their specialties, nor can they teach students to do so. Graduate training no longer forms minds; it has



become professionalized, oriented simply to the perpetuation of the professoriate.<sup>17</sup>

Due to this pressure quite as much as political correctness, intellectual life is leaving the university for venues where broader arguments are possible. One of these is non-scholarly, general-interest periodicals that deal seriously with public issues. Examples include *Commentary*, the old *Public Interest* (recently revived as *National Affairs*), *The National Interest*, *Society*, and *The American Prospect*. In these publications, the authors are often academics, but the approval process is very different from the journals. Peer review is absent or limited. Editors play a much stronger role, choosing papers where the issue is important and the argument is provocative and well-made. Literary quality, likely audience, and the visibility of the author all count for much more than they do in academic publishing. Relevance outweighs narrowly-focused rigor.

Another alternate venue is think tanks—privately supported organizations that study public issues outside the university. The best known of them in Washington include the Brookings Institution, the American Enterprise Institute (AEI), the Urban Institute, and the Heritage Foundation. The Congressional Research Service and the General Accountability Office are publicly supported and do research for Congress. Academics condescend to these bodies as doing “applied” rather than theoretical work. In fact, think tank research is often better than academic work because it is written closer to the real world and has more empirical content. The emphasis is not on abstruse methodology but on assembling new information to understand and solve important problems.

During 2008–2009, I visited regularly at AEI while on sabbatical. To my surprise, I found my fellow scholars to be more intellectual than most of my colleagues at NYU. They were more interested in ideas and had more to say about them than the typical academic. Their work ranged more widely and drew a wider readership. Some of them wrote non-policy books as well. They had this freedom largely due to one fact alone—they did not have to publish in the journals. They were appointed and assessed by more diffuse criteria, chiefly the visibility and influence of their work within the policy-making class. The target audience was not just other

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<sup>17</sup>Louis Menand, “The Ph.D. Problem,” *Harvard Magazine*, November-December 2009, 27–31, 91.

experts in the same policy area but policy experts and commentators more generally.<sup>18</sup>

A further outlet is the blogosphere. Many academics and other intellectuals write on the Internet. This work is at the other extreme from academic journals. It often faces no serious independent review, so the quality varies. But on the other hand, authors are free to address topical issues without the constraints of academic specialties. The very popularity of the web—even in academe—suggests what is wrong with the university—a fatal narrowing of discourse.

### The Vogue for Mathematics

The growing prominence of mathematics in research is another force promoting scholasticism. Such is the prestige of these methods that they have virtually taken over academic research outside the humanities. Training in statistics and game theory now dominates the Ph.D. programs in many departments, including mine. Students cannot even be admitted to these programs unless they are already strong in methods. The vast majority of social scientists hired by universities today, in any department, are primarily data analysts or game theorists.

In my coding of the *American Political Science Review*, articles using quantitative methods were not notably more scholastic than others, yet these methods probably have promoted obscurantism over time. They have much to contribute to research, but their use narrows the audience for results to those with the requisite training. More subtly, mathematical methods tend to direct attention to the tools of inquiry rather than the substance. Scholars today tend to choose their question to fit these methods, rather the other way around, as they should do.

The fascination with data analysis has fed the illusion that to collect information is all that understanding reality requires. But data is not knowledge. Connections must be made between variables. To do that requires a causal theory, and here social science is much weaker than in numbers. Other forms of research using direct observation—interviewing, documentary research, field observation—suggest causal connections more

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<sup>18</sup>Francis Fukuyama exemplifies this alternative track. He began his career at RAND, a think tank, before moving to academic appointments, and his seminal article, “The End of History?” *The National Interest* (Summer 1989): 3–18, appeared in the sort of non-academic publication mentioned above.

strongly, but they have been downgraded. The most convincing research combines data analysis with “hands-on” observations to interpret the numbers.<sup>19</sup> But despite these problems, data mining is likely to dominate research even more completely in the future.<sup>20</sup>

The prospect is that mathematics will advance in virtually all academic subjects, at the expense of richer evidence. Even the vast data bases that statisticians massage contain very limited information about their subject compared to what one gleans from interviews or site visits. Much of academic research is likely to turn into pure mathematics, without any empirical content. In the large domains colonized by rational choice, that process is already well advanced.

Intelligence is strongly valued in the culture. One of the chief drives of academics is simply to show how brilliant they are. Like nothing else, mathematical methods testify to one’s intelligence, at least of a technical kind. But other kinds of insight are slighted, such as psychological perceptiveness or the ability to see patterns in a complex situation. Mathematical research easily becomes an ego trip, undermining the humility that is, in fact, essential to understanding reality.

### Academic Prestige

Finally, scholasticism is due to the immense prestige of the modern university. Such is the demand of Americans to attend the most selective schools, and to pay the price, that colleges have lost much of their accountability to the broader society. For several decades past, it has seemed that they could do no wrong, that society would support and fund pretty much anything they did.

Critics say that academe has become wasteful and self-indulgent. It is spending too much on administration and lavish facilities. It has taken on too many tasks peripheral to its core missions, which are research and teaching. The usual criticism is that faculty are neglecting teaching in favor of research. Professors appear to be demanding less of students, and the latter

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<sup>19</sup>Lawrence M. Mead, “Policy Research: The Field Dimension,” *Policy Studies Journal* 33, no. 4 (November 2005): 548–50.

<sup>20</sup>Steve Lohr, “For Today’s Graduate, Just One Word: Statistics,” *New York Times*, August 5, 2009, <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/08/06/technology/06stats.html>.

are learning less than they did formerly. Students tolerate inattention because professors ask little of them and indulge them with grade inflation.<sup>21</sup> But academic research appears to be declining in quality as well, and that is my focus here.<sup>22</sup>

Internal university governance has abetted scholasticism, or at least enabled it. When I first arrived at NYU in 1979, departments decided whom to recruit using personnel committees with broad memberships. Recruitment aimed to cover the major subjects in political science, not pursue narrower specialties. Deans interviewed candidates for junior positions personally; their concern was for general intellectual quality, not specialized knowledge. Tenure standards were demanding, with only about half of junior appointments making the grade.

Today, however, departments often delegate recruitment to subcommittees of specialists in the field in question, reflecting the fragmentation already noted. The goal is often to snare the “hottest” candidates on the market regardless of field, not to cover all of a discipline. The dean no longer interviews junior candidates; sometimes subordinate deans do, but not regularly. At NYU, the change partly reflects the rising eminence of many departments, at least in academic terms, so that deans no longer feel the same need to second-guess them.

Tenure standards are still demanding, with the dean or his personnel committee sometimes rejecting candidates favored by departments. The criteria, however, are now conventionally scholastic, with the focus mainly on publications. One goal is to raise a department’s or the university’s position in the rankings established by *U.S. News & World Report* or the National Research Council, in which faculty publications figure. In my department, which is strongly scholastic, junior faculty either generate the publications needed for tenure, or they leave early for lack of them. It has been years since anyone was reviewed for tenure and denied, even in the most arcane areas of research. Thus, standards of a kind are upheld, but academics essentially self-select, and no serious question is raised about the obscure character of what they are doing.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>21</sup>Richard Arum and Josipa Roksa, “Your So-Called Education,” *New York Times*, May 15, 2011, <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/05/15/opinion/15arum.html>.

<sup>22</sup>Hacker and Dreifus, *Higher Education*; “Declining by Degree,” *The Economist*, September 4, 2010, 74.

<sup>23</sup>This picture of recruitment and tenure processes is based on input from current and former chairs of my department and the current associate dean for social science at NYU.

In addition, deans, like the presidents of universities, are so immersed in fundraising and in managing their expanding enterprises that they have less time for faculty oversight than they once did. Senior hires or recruitment for endowed chairs get more attention than the routine junior appointments and tenure cases that form a department over time. Even when higher administrators are conscientious, as they are at NYU, they have tacitly accepted a more and more straitened idea of scholarship. That shift is too glacial to get much attention, yet it is nudging the university toward irrelevancy.

### **Is Political Correctness a Cause?**

Some ask whether scholasticism is tied to the other great scourge of the university—political correctness. I see little overt connection. The narrow specialists who now dominate the academy seem largely indifferent to p.c. Their personal views may be left of center, yet their passion is usually mathematics or methods, not politics. Overt leftism is more common among older faculty who still define themselves chiefly as teachers. Deans do exert some pressure on departments to hire more women and minorities, but that is something apart from the drift toward obscurantism. Of course, academic specialties and journals that focus on the claims of minorities or women themselves show scholastic trends. But the drift toward obscurantism is far broader, afflicting the entire university.

Possibly, some faculty may choose obscure subjects just to stay away from political correctness. Politics involves conflict, and political correctness raises issues that are especially divisive—preferences and race. There may be a parallel to the tendency of Congress to assign different programs to different committees just to minimize conflict, although this makes it harder to limit spending in Washington.<sup>24</sup> Similarly here, narrow academic specialties tend to become separate worlds, each demanding support from the university as if others did not exist.

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<sup>24</sup>Theodore J. Lowi, *The End of Liberalism: The Second Republic of the United States*, 2nd ed. (New York: Norton, 1979).

## Deeper Causes

I see more connection between scholasticism and deep currents in American culture. When I was in graduate school forty years ago, academic research was more substantive than it has since become, but it was also elitist and subjective. In that world, great intellects constructed commanding overviews of big issues. To do that, you needed a capacious mind and a long and fortunate formation, preferably beginning with a challenging education and ending with tenure at elite schools. And your findings hinged as much on judgment as on method.<sup>25</sup>

In living memory, an entire generation of leading American intellectuals came out of such backgrounds to shape our understanding of modern America and its challenges—Daniel Bell, Nathan Glazer, Irving Louis Horowitz, Irving Howe, Irving Kristol, Seymour Martin Lipset, Daniel Patrick Moynihan, James Q. Wilson, and others. Some of them began in poverty but ended up teaching at leading universities. All were visible authors, widely read inside and outside academe. All employed broad reasoning powers, based on wide reading, chiefly in the research of others. Francis Fukuyama may be the best known political scientist still using such methods today.<sup>26</sup>

But American culture does not favor intellectual life in this highbrow sense. At its core the American mind is populist and rationalistic, not elitist or subjective. It seeks to open all social distinctions to as many people as possible, as befits a democratic society. And it believes in science, not insight, as the basis of knowledge. Those beliefs underlie two of the chief forces behind scholasticism—the huge expansion of the academic class and the rise of technical research methods. The Ph.D., which was once exclusive, has been vastly extended, becoming another mass degree, while the methods that scholars use are increasingly mechanical.

Where once great minds addressed large issues by reading and thinking, today more technical intellects address far narrower questions with vast data bases and computers. In political science, traditionalists at famous places like Harvard have been overshadowed by technicians working at huge

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<sup>25</sup>My Harvard teachers included Samuel H. Beer, Samuel P. Huntington, Henry Kissinger, Judith Shklar, and Michael Walzer, all of whom could be characterized in these terms.

<sup>26</sup>His books, like those of the Harvard teachers we shared, are based largely on secondary materials. My own books also draw on wide reading, although most also contain original evidence, some of it quantitative, about poverty and social programs.

Midwestern universities where Ph.D.s and journal articles are turned out on a kind of assembly line. It is not intellectual, but it is American. Thus, more reflective notions of mind are eclipsed.

When I chose an academic career, in the late 1960s, it had a whiff of the otherworldly about it. Friends told me I was consigning myself to low income and invisibility, compared to higher-paid, more glamorous professions such as law or medicine, let alone business. But obscurity had the virtue that at least those who chose academe had serious intellectual interests. The rising prestige of the university has changed that. Academe can now offer pay and recognition comparable to other callings—and better job security. That attracts careerists whose motivation is no longer the world of ideas. Formerly, academics embarked on a personal quest to create some new vision of reality. Today they advance by racking up journal articles, and the life of the mind is a lot less important.

### **Turning Back the Tide**

If scholasticism is so deeply rooted, it may seem quixotic to attempt to restore that older and more substantive style of research. And yet there are forces that might make this possible.

#### *Academic Resistance*

One of these is resistance from within. In political science, anyway, there have already been rebellions against quantitative methods. Much of their animus, I believe, was directed against scholasticism rather than mathematics per se. I also sense a rising weariness with obscurantist research even among its practitioners. Some can no longer persuade themselves that such limited inquiry is important. They are simply bored. They long for the meatier questions that academe used to address.<sup>27</sup>

The “perestroika” movement, mentioned above, commanded attention largely for political reasons—it was too strong to be ignored. It did not pose much intellectual challenge. Its supporters came largely from the fringes of political science, from less selective, often smaller schools where the faculty mainly teach and thus have little academic standing. To really challenge

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<sup>27</sup>I recently started a discussion group for academics and others that aims to address larger questions, and it has drawn a strong response. It includes faculty from NYU and other local universities as well as non-academics.

scholasticism, opponents need an argument that can impress the more accomplished. They must point out the intellectual weaknesses of the scholastic style. I have tried to do so in this and other articles cited above, and others are doing the same.<sup>28</sup> Soon the critics may gain enough traction to shift the intellectual tide back from rigor toward relevance. If the journals favor a broader research style, so will graduate programs, and the stream of academic research will quickly gain more substance and audience.

### ***Outside Pressure***

However, scholasticism is too entrenched to be challenged easily. To get change will also take outside pressure. Herbert London has argued that public disillusionment with elite universities is so strong that they may lose their authority to credential American youth. He speaks mainly of political correctness, which is indeed on the defensive.<sup>29</sup> A groundswell against scholasticism, however, is unlikely in the short run. Most parents are still getting what they want from the university—qualifications for their children—and are willing to pay for it. They are little aware of the drift of professors' research interests toward irrelevancy.

While some students do object to highly technical teachers who reduce their subjects to mathematics, scholasticism has not yet produced any general crisis in the classroom. Some scholastics persuade students of their methods, while others are kept out of trouble because today adjuncts do most of the teaching anyway. Graduate students, for their part, mostly like a scholastic style, and in any event they lack the standing to question it.

Outside pressure, rather, will come initially from the university's funders. The more alumni realize the triviality of most faculty research, the less inclined they will be to support it. The foundations and government agencies that fund academic projects have also begun to question scholasticism. As I mentioned in my Winter 2010 *AQ* article, a serious attempt was made recently to terminate National Science Foundation funding for political science, and obscurantism provided the main justification. I have also heard

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<sup>28</sup>For examples of this emerging critique, see Johan P. Olsen, "Garbage Cans, New Institutionalism, and the Study of Politics," *American Political Science Review* 95, no. 1 (March 2001): 191–98; Ian Shapiro, "Problems, Methods, and Theories in the Study of Politics, or What's Wrong with Political Science and What to Do About It," *Political Theory* 30, no. 4 (August 2002): 596–619; and Thomas C. Walker, "The Perils of Paradigm Mentalities: Revisiting Kuhn, Lakatos, and Popper," *Perspectives on Politics* 8, no. 2 (June 2010): 433–35.

<sup>29</sup>Herbert I. London, *Decline and Revival in Higher Education* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction, 2010).



private foundation officers and academic press editors lament the brainless character of much of the research they are asked to support.

The university will also face rising pressure to address major public issues. Policy questions are a great force against scholasticism, because they make academics take on problems that are visible outside the university, not just in academic circles. While academe claims to do this, in practice it has largely retreated from relevance. Alumni, funders, and government will all press for greater engagement with such challenges as poverty, globalization, and climate change. This will force administrators to give more attention and reward to the few faculty who actually have influence in government.<sup>30</sup>

Pressures could also come from business, as it becomes clear that the neglect of teaching is producing graduates without the analytic and writing ability that employers expect. And if students can no longer get the jobs they expect, this will finally mobilize parents to demand more attention to teaching. Forcing faculty to teach more seriously would not by itself improve research—it would take time away from it. But it would force the hiring of faculty with broader interests and thus promote better inquiry in the long run.

### ***Broadening Recruitment***

The university desperately needs broader minds. As mentioned, higher-level administrators in universities have largely accepted the narrowing of faculty research and recruitment. But if faced with outside pressure, and if armed with a serious critique of scholasticism, they might question this. Deans already exert some control over how faculty spend their time, for example, which courses they have to teach. Administrators might also demand that faculty justify the research projects they undertake before spending time in them, as think tank scholars have to do.<sup>31</sup> The realism of research, and the audience for it, would once again matter.

More important, universities should reestablish the broader criteria for faculty appointments and tenure that prevailed several decades ago, and which are still seen in the think tanks. Junior recruitment should be recast. One reason for scholasticism, mentioned above, is the frantic competition of

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<sup>30</sup>Other critics of graduate education as unduly specialized also propose opening it to larger social concerns. See Menand, “Ph.D. Problem,” and Mark C. Taylor, “End the University as We Know It,” op-ed, *New York Times*, April 26, 2009, <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/04/27/opinion/27taylor.html>.

<sup>31</sup>On precedent is that faculty at NYU are supposed to get approval of sabbatical projects before they undertake them, although this is now a formality.

new Ph.D.s for academic positions, which are far too few for them. That forces candidates to specialize early and extremely, and if tenure-track jobs are given to them at this point, most will remain narrowly focused for life. To allow broader training and research, the output of Ph.D.s should be radically reduced so that they can pursue broader interests and still get academic jobs. Better still, junior appointments might not be given to fresh Ph.D.s at all, but to somewhat older people who had left the university and attained broader experience. In political science, this would mean working in or around government. They would then compete for junior jobs based on a research agenda drawn from that experience. They would be judged for tenure based on the visibility and influence, as well as the competence, of the ensuing publications. This would produce academics better able to tackle important topics and command an audience, as the specialists we have now cannot. Professors would again be intellectuals first, and pursuers of an academic discipline only second.<sup>32</sup>

Even in the tenured ranks, deans could force the hiring of broader-gauge minds more able to address public issues. In 1969, for example, Nathan Glazer and several others were simply appointed to tenured positions at Harvard in order to give more attention to urban problems.<sup>33</sup> Such figures bring wider methods and audience to research and make it harder to justify narrowness.

Some universities have allowed the creation of American studies programs to combat political correctness by giving more respectful attention to the American regime and its values.<sup>34</sup> These programs restrain scholasticism as well and thus are valuable. However, they are funded largely by outside donors and taught largely by adjuncts. They are mostly ignored by the academic establishment. To force serious intellectual change there is no substitute for changing the tenured faculty. That requires bringing in new intellectuals from outside academe and giving them positions where they cannot be ignored.

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<sup>32</sup>My own career anticipated this pattern. After graduate school, I worked initially in Washington and only then was appointed at NYU. Government experience enabled me to do much more ambitious, and less scholastic, research than I could have done otherwise. I was a policy researcher first and only then a political scientist.

<sup>33</sup>Glazer's position was one of five funded by the Ford Foundation. See James Traub, "Nathan Glazer Changes His Mind, Again," *New York Times Magazine*, June 28, 1998, <http://www.nytimes.com/1998/06/28/magazine/nathan-glazer-changes-his-mind-again.html>.

<sup>34</sup>The best known is the James Madison Program in American Ideals and Institutions at Princeton, created by politics professor Robert George.

## *A New Reformation*

The universities have come to resemble the Catholic church of the fifteenth century—a once great institution that has become self-absorbed and has largely lost its social function. The protected clergy of that era were not unlike the privileged faculty of today. Society supported them with few qualms because they were believed to serve an essential spiritual purpose. Then it was to help the laity get into heaven.

Today's university claims, similarly, to enlighten society. But observers of what faculty actually do are beginning to say that the emperor has no clothes. In the earlier case, the cataclysm of the Reformation forced the church to reestablish ties with society. That did not destroy religion as traditionalists feared. Freed from Rome's stifling hand, a new age of religious faith dawned. Both Protestant churches and a reformed Catholic church vied for adherents.<sup>35</sup> That competition carried over to America, enlivening our society ever since.

Similarly in academe, to break the grip of scholasticism would not mean the death of research but a new age of inquiry, more vital and authentic than before. The questions, the stakes, and the audience would all be larger, to the benefit of the university and society alike.

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<sup>35</sup>Philip S Gorski, "Historicizing the Secularization Debate: Church, State, and Society in Late Medieval and Early Modern Europe, Ca. 1300 to 1700," *American Sociological Review* 65, no. 1 (February 2000): 138–67.