

THREE FORMS OF BIAS IN ACADEMIC INSTRUCTION

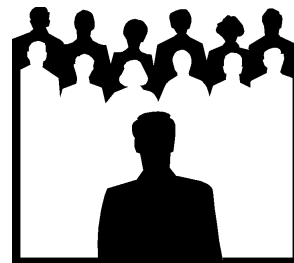
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BIAS AS FORM RATHER THAN JUST CONTENT

It is a common complaint amongst libertarians, classical liberals and conservatives (e.g. Marsland, 1995) that the tuition received by students at all levels in the social sciences and allied subjects is biased: i.e. it is taught by collectivists using texts written by other collectivists, frequently, it must be admitted, to students who are already collectivists, often thanks to the previous stage in their education.

I do not dissent from this view. Nor do I intend to suggest how we go about solving the problem. Instead, all I want to do is to note, with some examples drawn from personal experience, the three successively more damaging forms this bias takes:

- Active and Overt.
- Active and Covert.
- Negative.

The following has been drawn from my own experiences of nearly a decade as a mature student of (successful!) further, higher and vocational education and training at a number of institutions. I have also included the thoughts of some of those that I have met on these courses, plus those who have attended others.

Although I cite below two instances drawn from personal experience, because of its highly empirically-driven and/or vocational nature much of my tuition appears to have been relatively free of ideological bias, at least compared to the experiences of some I know.

ACTIVE AND OVERT

The first type is, by its very nature, the most obvious; I also suspect that it is the least problematic and may well be defensible in some cases. It involves lecturers clearly and unambiguously stating personal political views with no pretence, or hope of pretending, that they are doing otherwise.

The most acceptable form of this is where a student may ask a lecturer for his/her own view on a subject that has been previously discussed in neutral terms or which has included a genuine range of opinion. I believe strongly that lecturers, certainly when actually asked by a student, should be able to openly state their own opinions. The only reasonable qualification to this is that it should not negatively impinge upon their assessment of work by students who, equally openly, whether in the lecture room or in submitted coursework or exams, state views opposing that of the lecturer. Or, of course, the opposite.

The less acceptable form is when lectures are delivered which are so hopelessly and obviously one-sided to all but a complete fool that no-one takes them seriously. I recall a lecture in macro-economics where a loving exposition of Keynesian thought was followed by a straw-man parody of monetarism and jokes about the then Conservative prime-minister's intellectual capabilities (involving a fire at 10 Downing Street and a rescued and uncompleted child's colouring-in book). Unless one is feeling particularly argumentative and factually well-equipped my advice is just to ignore them.

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ACTIVE AND COVERT

Far more effective than the preceding, this involves the weaving-in of a personal political view or agenda into a lecture as if it was part of an impartial academic exposition.

This may not always be deliberate, but simply a reflection of views so strongly held and unchallenged that they seem like 'common-sense' to such an extent that believing in (say) the superiority of a planned economy is as manifestly obvious and true, and as unworthy of explanation or criticism, as the unexceptional notion that it is generally a good idea for human beings to take a breath now and then.

Unless one is already very well-versed in the particular subject under discussion, and/or is paranoid about what certain lecturers get up to, then I think that there is a tendency for all but the very brightest students to put their critical faculties 'on hold' during lectures and accept what they are told as 'the truth' in a way that most would not do if much the same thing was said by (say) a politician. As a result, students' knowledge of an academic area becomes corrupted with 'facts' which are not really facts at all, but opinion or at best self-servingly selective facts.

The example that I always cite, partly because it is strong in my memory due to constant rehearsal, and partly because it *is* such a good example, comes from a lecture in clinical psychology. It is worth going into in some detail, both to fully explain what went on, and also to show how the well-prepared student can sometimes catch a miscreant out!

This whole area of clinical and counselling psychology, and in particular unipolar depression, is one that I have taken a special interest in from my earliest days as an A-level psychology student (e.g. Meek, 1997). So I was interested to learn one afternoon that the recorded prevalence of unipolar depression had increased since 1979. This lecture was before May 1997 and we all know what happened in 1979 don't we? It was the year that utter darkness fell upon the land, the year when honest *Guardian* readers went in fear: the Year of the Coming of Thatcher!

It was subtly done, but students were left in no doubt that the only inference that they could draw was that Margaret Thatcher and her ilk had, in some manner, caused at least additional mental illness (*sic*). I think that you will agree that this is a tremendously powerful image for an impressionable undergraduate student to take away, one of those gosh-wow things that one remembers: that Thatcherism (whatever that may have been in reality: see Meek, 1998: 1-2) causes (the difference between causation and correlation no doubt being ignored) mental illness.

Moreover, the best place to hide a lie is amongst the truth, and the prevalence of depression *had* been going up since 1979: being interested I had already read a relevant textbook (Rosenhan and Seligman, 1995: 362-363) and the epidemiological studies from the USA clearly supported this contention. Hang on: the USA? Now we

all know that Margaret Thatcher had a tremendous influence on President Reagan, but really! And what are all these graphs on page 363 featuring birth-years on about?

Closer examination revealed that the simple 'fact' of the increase in the prevalence of depression in this country since 1979 turns out to have been artfully abstracted from the international phenomenon (and the validity and reasons for this are another matter) that there had been a *general* increase in the prevalence of recorded depression amongst successively younger generations since clinicians, psychologists and other researchers started bothering to record this sort of information at the beginning of the 20th century. Not quite the same thing at all!

NEGATIVE

But both the preceding pale into insignificance when compared to the final method of bias: simply not allowing students to become aware of the existence of whole schools of thought. (And here, certainly, the nature of subjects that I studied, particularly at postgraduate level, lessened this problem as far as I was concerned.)

I have the impression that topics which have the capability of being highly ideologically-driven tend to be taught with two sets of material. The first will be the 'mainstream': for which read social-democrat, centrist, moderate etc. The other will be the 'critical' material, for which read Marxist, radical-feminist, post-modernist (and I still don't know what that is), Green, or some such. Very little time, if any, will be devoted to libertarian, classical liberal or even genuine conservative thinking. Look through the academic reading lists or the library shelves and one will find very little in the way of the latter, but an awful lot of the first two sets described.

It is therefore no surprise to note the collectivist-inclined students being churned out by contemporary institutions of education since they will have been bombarded with statist propaganda from their first day at school. Even those that more-or-less consciously reject the more extreme collectivism rarely possess any ideological defences: they may regard all this Marxist stuff as silly, but when they have been told that the only apparent alternative is 'moderatism' it is no wonder that as voters and consumers they acquiesce in, and indeed support, the massive state interventionism and anti-individualism in welfare, industry, environmental matters, and so forth that we see today.

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