

# AMERICAN ACADEME AND THE KNOWLEDGE-POLITICS PROBLEM

Working paper, March 16, 2009

Neil Gross

University of British Columbia

ngross@interchange.ubc.ca

In recent decades social scientists have considered whether some long-established professions in American society, such as medicine and law, may be undergoing a process of deprofessionalization (Draper 2003; Ritzer and Walczak 1988; Rothman 1984; Van Hoy 1995). Deprofessionalization can be defined as a “decline in power which results in a decline in the degree to which professions possess... a constellation of characteristics denoting a profession” such as “altruism, autonomy, authority over clients, general systematic knowledge, and community and legal recognition” (Ritzer and Walczak 1988:6). Although professionals in the U.S. continue to fare well in terms of life chances and occupational status, so much so that some analysts view the occupational closure that helps to characterize professions as a key driver of wage inequality in the labor market overall (Weeden 2002), a variety of social changes are said to be working in tandem today to erode the professional standing of elite fields. For example, as Rothman (1984) notes, the dramatic growth of higher education and spread of new information technologies has made it harder for some professionals to claim the same kind of monopoly over esoteric knowledge as was key to most professionalization “projects” in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (Abbott 1988; Freidson 1986; Larson 1977). At the same time, changes in the

organizational structures that house professionals, such as the rise of managed care organizations for doctors and large law firms for lawyers, threaten to undermine the workplace autonomy that has long been a hallmark of professions, and to replace relatively autonomous principles of professional practice with principles of the market and of bureaucratic rationality. Whether these and other changes are leading to deprofessionalization per se or simply a restructuring of the professions is subject to debate (Fisc 2006; Freidson 1984; Haug 1975; Leicht and Fennell 1997), but they have certainly been consequential for professionals, the publics they serve, and competitor occupations for which structural shifts figure as openings allowing for the possibility of jurisdictional challenge.

Commentators on American academe have observed significant transformations in the higher education sector beginning in the 1980s that seem to entail parallel losses of power for the academic profession. These transformations, considered in other chapters of this volume, include the expansion of for-profit higher education institutions, growth in the ranks of non-tenure-track faculty, increasing cooperation between universities and the corporate sector that allows the pursuit of profit to directly shape research agendas, growing pressures around institutional competitiveness that have empowered university administrators, and the emergence of a consumerist ethic on the part of students (e.g., Bok 2004; Kleinman 2003; Readings 1996). Only occasionally considered in this context is another important development: a growing chorus of conservative critics who argue that segments of American academe have to a large extent abandoned their traditional mission of impartial scholarship and become staging grounds for leftist thought and politics (e.g., D'Souza 1991; Horowitz 2006, 2007; Kimball 1998). These critics allege that for a significant minority of faculty today research amounts to little more than rehashing stale ideas of the left, that too often teaching is indistinguishable from political

indoctrination, that academe as a whole is hostile to conservative viewpoints, thinkers, and students, and that the resulting lack of “intellectual diversity” on campus is detrimental to science and student learning. Criticism of liberal professors has been a feature of American conservative discourse since the publication of William F. Buckley’s *God and Man at Yale* in 1951, but such criticism reached a crescendo in the period 2002-2008 as conservative advocacy organizations devoted to higher education carved out a stable niche for themselves in the landscape of the broader American conservative movement, gained routinized access to media outlets, and were able to capitalize on high profile cases (for example, incendiary comments made by University of Colorado ethnic studies professor Ward Churchill) that seemed to cast professors in a negative light. Because conservative critics call into question the legitimacy of such professional rights and prerogatives as tenure and the authority of academic departments to make decisions about hiring and promotion with little substantive input from external constituencies – and because they question whether professors, especially those on the far left, deserve the high levels of prestige they enjoy – such critics should be seen as mounting a significant extra-occupational challenge to the American academic profession, just as the feminist movement and a number of “health social movements” (Brown et al 2004) were important challengers to the medical profession in the 1970s and beyond.

In this chapter, I explore empirically an important set of issues directly related to this challenge: how in fact professors think about the proper relationship between their own politics and their research and teaching. To do so I draw on interviews with 57 American professors conducted in 2006-7. Five disciplines are represented in my sample: sociology, economics, literature, biology, and engineering. I selected these fields because they are large, central, and span a wide range of subject matters, and because survey research shows that there is variation in

faculty political views across them (Gross and Simmons 2007). Here I present three main findings from the interview data. First, with regard to research, my data confirm what many observers of contemporary American academe have noted: there is significant variation across disciplines in the degree to which notions like objectivity and politically value-free knowledge are seen as unproblematic and desirable. The field of literature exhibits a high degree of epistemological skepticism and politicization, sociology a moderate degree, and the other three fields almost no skepticism whatsoever. Second, with regard to teaching, norms remain in place in all five disciplines against overt partisanship in the classroom, and champions of “critical pedagogy,” the view that education should alert students to instances of what the left sees as social injustice, are rare. The vast majority of professors think the goal of teaching should be to instruct students in the subject matter of their fields or train them in various intellectual skills (though conservative critics are right to point out that the line between instruction and critical pedagogy becomes blurry in disciplines whose major problematics have a decidedly left valence). But there is disagreement on the question of whether, when discussing a politically controversial topic in class, professors should let their own political views be known. To some extent this variation cross-cuts differences in disciplinary culture and is associated with the different institutional positions professors occupy, their political views, their gender, and ultimately their assumptions about students as learners.

Third and finally, I find disagreement within the academic profession as to the meaning of academic freedom. This is not a topic to which most of the professors I interviewed appeared to have given much thought, but when queried, just under half described academic freedom in terms consistent with its original meaning, as a professional prerogative associated with their duties and obligations as pursuers and disseminators of truth (Dewey [1902] 1976; Hofstadter

and Metzger 1955; Menand 1996; Post 2006). About a third described it as an extension of their speech rights, and the rest fell somewhere between these two extremes. My intention in presenting these findings is neither to validate nor debunk conservative complaints, but to shed light on the cultural terrain over which conservative critics of American higher education and the professoriate's defenders struggle; this as a prelude to a fuller analysis of the campaign against the "liberal professoriate": its origins, dynamics, and consequences.

A secondary goal of the chapter is to make a contribution to the sociology of knowledge. I aim to encourage more systematic attention to how academicians in various fields and at various points in time understand the relationship between their political views, values, and engagements and their activities of knowledge creation and dissemination, and to how such understandings inform and shape academic work and political practice. To be sure, considerable research has been undertaken on related topics. For example, a large body of scholarship in the field of science studies shows how scientists' political commitments, both conscious and tacit, may enter into and inflect their investigations (e.g., Barnes 1977; Shapin and Schaffer 1985; Haraway 1989), part of a larger process of "coproduction" by which states, economies, and social orders and science, knowledge, and technology become intertwined and help to reciprocally bring one another about (Jasanoff 2004). Likewise, among sociologists of science and academic life, there has been growing interest in phenomena that are even more clearly poised at the intersection of politics and scientific or academic work, such as fields of study with explicitly political agendas like African-American studies (Rojas 2007) or efforts by social movement activists to steer science in new directions (Epstein 1996; Frickel 2004; Moore 2008). Research on the sociology of intellectuals, for its part, routinely explores their role as carriers of political values and agents of social change (Kurzman and Owens 2002). Finally, sociological

and historical scholarship on the trajectories of disciplinary fields has considered how epistemological and methodological preferences – including views on objectivity and stances of political engagement or disengagement – may be a function of shifting political, cultural, and institutional circumstances (e.g., Gross 2008; Novick 1988; Steinmetz 2005).

These lines of investigation are important, but could be usefully supplemented and made more commensurable by an explicit focus on the thick and often contested cultural understandings that knowledge producers have of how the boundaries should be drawn in general and in their own work between politics and scientific or intellectual inquiry. Such a focus need not be created *de novo* theoretically; it can be layered onto an existing conceptual apparatus: Knorr Cetina's (1999) notion of "epistemic cultures." Rejecting both philosophical and Mertonian norm-based conceptions of the unity of the sciences, Knorr Cetina (1999:3) argues that fields may vary not just in what they study or their patterns of social organization, but also with respect to their "architectures of empirical approaches, specific constructions of the referent, particular ontologies of instruments," and in terms of the nature of the "social machines" they employ to bring knowledge about. In other words, fields vary in their understanding of what it means to know, and in their sense for what is required of those who would advance credible, warrantable claims to truth. The cultural schemas and practices that provide the basis for such variation, and thus help make possible the production of knowledge in a given field, comprise its epistemic culture.

I argue that an additional and neglected dimension of epistemic culture concerns the way in which fields deal with what I call the "knowledge-politics problem." This is the need faced by all communities of knowledge producers and disseminators, particularly those in our highly reflexive, politicized era, to formulate for their members more or less coherent stances that may

be taken on the question of how if at all one's political views should factor into research and teaching. Answers to this question hinge to some extent on how those communities define concepts like "politics" and "science," and are also closely tied but not reducible to understandings of the nature and desirability of objectivity (see Daston and Galison 2007). Mapping through empirical investigation how different epistemic cultures come down on the knowledge-politics problem – that is, how they conceive of the proper relationship between the personal politics of knowledge producers and their research and teaching activities – should yield additional insight into the mechanisms and dynamics of coproduction insofar as these are mediated by cultural understandings.

## DATA AND METHODS

The interviews I analyze here are followup interviews to a nationally-representative survey of the American professoriate I conducted with Solon Simmons in 2006. The survey focused on professors' social and political attitudes. It covered professors with full-time appointments teaching in most fields and types of institutions, including community colleges, and achieved a 51 percent response rate with 1471 valid cases. The final question on the questionnaire asked respondents whether they would agree to participate in an interview in which the issues raised in the survey could be fleshed out in more detail. To select respondents for the followup interviews, three research assistants and I first grouped professors who so agreed according to discipline, pooling those who gave more specialized designations into the focal disciplinary categories of sociologist, economist, biologist, engineer, and professor of literature. We then contacted potential interviewees by email, employing quota sampling procedures in which our aim was to interview ten professors in each discipline, obtain a sufficiently large number of interviewees in

each of three institutional strata (community colleges, four year BA-granting schools, and PhD granting schools) to allow for meaningful comparisons, and have a sample that was more or less reflective of the gender composition of the five fields. Only about half of the professors thus contacted responded to our query, and in the end we conducted 57 interviews. Interviews were conducted by phone by my research assistants and me over the course of several months. A semi-structured interview schedule was employed, and questions covered topics ranging from political self-identity to views of politics, research, and teaching. Pedagogical issues were given special attention because these were barely covered in the initial survey. The average length of the interviews was 48 minutes. Interviews were recorded and transcribed.

Two different research assistants then coded the transcripts according to an inductively-derived standardized coding scheme. The coders began by coding the same five transcripts. They coded identically 85 percent of the time. Discrepant codings were discussed and corrected, and then three additional transcripts were processed by both coders. This time there was 90 percent intercoder agreement. The remaining transcripts were subsequently divided up between the two coders. Later, quantitative data was compiled about the distribution of codes.

Table 1 shows the breakdown of the sample on key disciplinary, institutional, and sociodemographic characteristics. The interview data do not reflect the results of a random sampling procedure, and the composition of the sample is somewhat different than might have been expected had such a procedure been possible. Specifically, a comparison to the survey sample suggests that in the followup sample untenured assistant professors are overrepresented among sociologists and underrepresented among biologists and economists, and women are somewhat underrepresented among professors of literature.

Table 1 about here

## THE POSSIBILITY OF OBJECTIVE, VALUE-FREE KNOWLEDGE

Nathan (here and elsewhere I have changed names and identifying characteristics to preserve anonymity) is a 37-year old assistant professor of English at a public BA-granting university in the South. His doctorate is in communications, not literature, but he has been part of an English department for four years, and is steeped in the epistemic culture of that field. When we asked how important the notion of objectivity was to him, he replied: “I’m not a big fan of the notion ... The idea of [a] separation from interest or situation is... suspicious to me.” In lieu of claims to objective knowledge, Nathan would “much rather see... disclosed interest and disclosed situatedness and... being able to... work with that... in a constructive way.” Nathan’s epistemic views extend beyond his own field to color how he evaluates knowledge in general. “In everything from journalism to the sciences,” he insisted, “...claims and appeals to objectivity tend to do more to mask interest and situatedness than they do to actually assist in knowledge in any way.”

At the opposite extreme from Nathan is Mark, an associate professor of electrical engineering at another state institution in the South. When we asked what role if any politics plays in his research, he replied by telling a joke we heard numerous times, always in slightly different form, from other respondents. “One of the beauties of engineering,” he said, “...is there is no such thing... as a Jewish volt, there is no such thing as a Republican ampere.... There’s no such thing as a conservative kilogram. Or an atheist heater. You know, the atheist looks at the volt meter and it reads 1.26 volts, the ardent Christian conservative reads 1.26 volts, the Muslim reads 1.26 volts. There is some measure of objectivity in this profession.”

The differences between Nathan and Mark are not idiosyncratic; they reflect widespread assumptions about objectivity and the knowledge-politics problem that are built into the epistemic cultures of their respective disciplinary fields. Nathan's field, literature, is characterized by deep skepticism about the possibility of objective knowledge; by the sense that at every point in the knowledge production process, and no matter the nature of one's object of investigation, political and other value commitments enter in to inform one's theoretical and methodological approach as well as the substance of one's claims; and by a valuation in this context of intellectual practices of reflexivity whereby one endeavors not to hide one's political interests, but to bring them to the fore and frame one's knowledge claims in terms of them. By contrast, Mark's field, engineering, is characterized by a rampant and taken for granted objectivism, by a sense that the nature of the objects studied is such that political or other values can be kept at bay, and moreover that they should be kept at bay because the goal of inquiry is to produce knowledge that mirrors the world as it actually is, independent of the standpoint from which one views it. In neither of these two fields is subscription to these epistemic ideals unanimous, but it is the rare literature professor who thinks of objectivity as unproblematic, and the rare engineer who would prefer that engineering knowledge be properly "situated." Objectivism was also widespread in two of the other fields I studied: biology and economics. Sociology I found to be an epistemological hybrid, combining elements of objectivism and skepticism.

In one sense it is unsurprising to find professors of literature embracing a culture of skepticism. Literature was one of the most affected of the traditional disciplines by a variety of intellectual movements that appeared on the scene in the late 1960s and 1970s and which by the 1980s had become institutionalized – movements like deconstructionism, poststructuralism,

postmodernism, neopragmatism, Lacanian literary theory, feminist theory, and postcolonial theory. These movements were theoretically and epistemologically diverse, but one thing they shared was skepticism toward naïve realism and empiricism as applied to literature or other arenas of knowledge. It is impossible, intellectual leaders of these movements claimed, for epistemic subjects to ever step fully outside the bounds of their own worldviews and assumptions – or, following Nietzsche, to remove themselves in their capacity as agents of knowing from their own practical purposes, designs, and wills to power. Knowledge is never a view from nowhere, and one of the main aims of literary criticism in light of this insight should be the interpretation of texts and cultural objects with a view to the hidden vantage points they express and the power relations they go to support. Many of my literary studies interviewees were explicit in linking their doubts about objectivity to these theoretical currents. For example, a 49-year old associate professor of literature at a four year school in New York state recalled that she “was in college in the late 70s, and it was still a period of what's called in literature ‘new criticism.’ You analyze a text as an autonomous work of art, and you don't contextualize it. And that never felt right to me. Even as an undergraduate, I... always vowed that if I ever did go on [in academia] something I would do is work on contextualization.” “Art doesn't just arise without being influenced by political events and its cultural context,” she insisted, noting that the theoretical “pendulum” in her field swung back toward a recognition of this when she was in graduate school. Her sense of the importance of context led her to specialize in a particular strain of eighteenth-century literature “that was very clearly at the intersection of political, legal, and economic theories, and the aestheticization of those things.” At the same time it undermined her own belief in the possibility of objective knowledge. As far as objectivity goes, she told us,

“there isn't any in my field. One of the things we are now teaching is that there is no objectivity. There are fancy words for it, but you bring your personal baggage to a text when you analyze it.”

This was not an unusual sentiment among the literary scholars to whom we spoke. Less than a third described objectivity in research as unproblematic or desirable. This did not mean that for them fidelity to textual or historical materials or adherence to high scholarly standards were concepts without meaning. As one scholar put it, “I certainly believe that every text... is the product of a person positioned... but I also believe that my approach to scholarship does try to be fair and judicious to what others have written and to take that into account.” But professors of literature do tend to doubt that their own experiences and worldviews – and as part of this their political or other value-commitments – can ever be bracketed when they undertake research and writing, and some suspect that such a bracketing cannot be successfully accomplished in other fields either. Importantly, nearly all professors of literature – 85.7 percent in my interview sample – consider themselves liberals or progressives and hold liberal views on a wide variety of social and political issues. When we asked another literature professor whether his own politics factor into his research, he replied simply, “They do.” His politics, he told us – which he characterized as “very, very liberal” – could not help but affect “the way I choose topics. The way I treat topics. The way I write.” As noted above, in light of the success of movements like postmodernism this sort of response to the knowledge-politics problem is not altogether surprising. But I was surprised to see how widely shared skepticism toward objectivity was within a discipline known more for disputatiousness than for consensus; by the extent to which it is so taken for granted that it was normatively acceptable for my interviewees to offer only schematic and halting justifications for it; and by the fact that nearly all seemed to regard a “hermeneutics of suspicion” as normal intellectual practice, with notions like objectivity,

objective representation, and value-free knowledge seen as expressing a philosophical and theoretical naivety that is at once dangerous and somehow déclassé.

Things could not be more different in engineering and biology. Although some of the most trenchant critics of postmodernism have come from the ranks of the physical and natural sciences – think of physicist Alan Sokal, perpetrator of the so-called “Sokal hoax” or biologist Paul Gross, one of the authors of *Higher Superstition: The Academic Left and Its Quarrels With Science* (1994) – almost none of the engineers or biologists we interviewed gave any hint that they were familiar with the kinds of intellectual and philosophical work that led literary scholars to be so skeptical of objectivity and the possibility of separating knowledge from politics. Only one of the ten biologists we interviewed expressed any real doubts about the possibility of objective knowledge, none of the engineers did, and the vast majority of professors in both fields insisted that their personal politics simply do not enter into their research.

Engineers and biologists ground their claims to this effect in three kinds of assumptions. First, they assume that the nature of the objects they study is inherently apolitical. For example, a tenured molecular biologist at a four year school in California said: “I’m... interested in a topic called abiogenesis, and how a cell can come to function. I don’t think that has much of a political take on it.” Earlier in the interview, in the context of a question about teaching, he noted that “molecules react the exact same way, whether you’re... liberal [or conservative].” This view – that the objects of interest to science and the causal processes surrounding them are apolitical, and hence that there is no space for politics to intrude in legitimate scientific research – is what underlies the joke on which we heard so many variations. For Mark, the engineer mentioned earlier, the realm of science and the realm of political values are so distinct that it is literally ridiculous to mention them in the same breath, as in the phrase “conservative kilogram.” A

mechanical engineer born in 1979 expressed the same assumption when he joked that “a chunk of metal doesn't have politics,” as did a 49-year old developmental neurobiologist who studies bees and proclaimed, “honeybees do not have politics.” Engineers and biologists obviously do recognize that the enterprise of science unfolds in a political context that may bear on its capacity to yield new findings. In this regard, a young software engineer at a PhD granting school in the Pacific Northwest told the story of how “I got a grant... a while back... from NASA... Got the award letter in October. Two weeks to the day before it was supposed to turn on... NASA froze all funding that was not active and eventually killed the program.” The story was meant to be an example of how politics and scientific research can collide, with the nature of that collision being that “politics affects the money that’s put into research funding.” But this kind of recognition – in which politics establishes an external context for research, facilitating or impeding it, is worlds away from the notion that science itself, in the propositional claims that comprise its theories, methods, and findings, could have an inherently political dimension.

A second assumption that grounds the culture of objectivism inhabited by engineers and biologists is less ontological than methodological: not only the nature of the objects studied, but as importantly the scientific method leaves no room for the intrusion of political values or views. When we asked the neuroscientist who studies bees his views of objectivity, he replied: “being a scientist, we have to be objective. That's the whole thing! I approach everything objectively, and I present the facts. I don't mind if people have a different opinion, but they'd better be able to convince me of that opinion by bringing in scientific facts.” For engineers and biologists, the scientific method is not just a matter of following certain procedural conventions, like formalizing and testing hypotheses, but is also about a certain spirit one brings to research. A wildlife ecologist teaching in a biology department told us that for him objectivity means

“designing a study that’s well designed, looking at all the possibilities where there could be mistakes, figuring out what assumptions you’re making ahead of time, knowing what those assumptions are and clearly stating ‘em. And then with your results trying to think of all the possibilities of what [they] really do mean.” Someone conscientiously embracing such a spirit and aiming thereby to give a maximally accurate representation of the world could not by definition allow political values to intrude, even if they were somehow relevant. So “in science,” the ecologist concluded, “I don’t think... politics really can mesh in there.”

Third and finally, a number of engineers and biologists linked their exclusion of political considerations from research to the trust they see as being placed in them by the users of their findings. When we asked a composite materials engineer what role if any politics plays in his research, he replied sharply, “None.” His work involves “break[ing] things for research and report[ing] on how strong they are.” Some of his research has military applications, and while Defense Department “program managers” who make decisions about the use of materials may have biases in favor of this or that “platform,” his job as a scientist is to put any biases he may have aside, look the program manager in the eye, and say “Material A is stronger than material B. I have data to prove it.” Only by doing so can he preserve his scientific credibility and fulfill his ethical responsibilities. “In my field,” he said solemnly, “objectivity is all we have.”

But engineers and biologists were not the only ones in my sample to inhabit a culture of objectivity. Almost 90 percent of the economists we interviewed also characterized objectivity in their research as unproblematic and desirable. Like engineers and biologists, economists view objectivity as grounded in the nature of the object they study, the methods they use, and their responsibilities to decision-makers and the wider public. For economists, however, these are not discrete assumptions, but are bound together in a coherent paradigm and research program for

their discipline. This paradigm, of course, revolves around the notion that markets are sites where prices are determined by laws of supply and demand playing themselves out via the preferences and choices of rational economic actors. For economists, it is the economy as understood through the lens of this paradigm that ultimately insures that economic research, properly carried out, will not be tainted by political values. Such a claim may sound strange to noneconomists. From the vantage point of other social sciences like sociology or anthropology, the assumptions at the heart of contemporary economics are nothing if not political, for at least two reasons. First, these assumptions revolve around an image of human beings – as rational utility-maximizers – that is at odds with the sensibilities of many other disciplines, and with much empirical and historical data, and hence would seem subscribable to only by virtue of the exertion of a kind of willful ignorance occasioned by the desire to do something with those assumptions. Second, such assumptions carry with them normative implications about how economies should be run – namely, more or less in line with the principles of free-market economics, putting more emphasis on market efficiency than on equitable resource distribution – in which political and economic actors have major investments. But economists don't see things this way. For most, it is simply a scientific fact, an axiom of their science, that economic actors are utility-maximizers and that therefore markets tend to work in certain predictable ways.

Because this is so, proper economic research does not admit of political influence.

The clash between these two ways of thinking about economics is nicely captured in an exchange between one of the interviewers – a PhD candidate in sociology – and a 36-year old male macroeconomist teaching at a community college in Maryland.

*Interviewer:* How if at all do your politics factor into your research, such as selection of topics, methodology, theory, et cetera?

*Interviewee:* Not much at all.

*Interviewer:* Any role in selection of topics, for example?

*Interviewee:* No.

*Interviewer:* How about theory? I mean, for example, you don't take a Marxian economics approach?

*Interviewee:* No, I'm a free market capitalist economist, like 98 percent of the other economists out there.

*Interviewer:* So do you think your politics factors into that?

*Interviewee:* No.

*Interviewer:* Can you explain? If one were to make an argument that political bias is everywhere, they'd say, well, if you're a leftist, you're going to be a Marxist economist regardless of what the facts tell you, and if you're on the right, you're going to be a microeconomic Milton Friedman economist, regardless of what the facts tell you.

*Interviewee:* Where politics enter into research agendas in my field is in terms of policy analysis and policy prescriptions, and that is not an aspect of my professional activity.

This economist was not alone in believing that economic research in the strict sense is objective and apolitical. Thus it was that in response to our question about how politics might influence research one economist responded, “Not at all. My research tends to be more on the technical side,” another said “virtually none at all,” and a third replied, “No, no. It wasn't the kind of research I was doing.” Still another scholar, a 53-year old labor economist, told us, “one of my favorite titles in the economics literature is ‘Let's Take the 'Con' Out of Econometrics’ [the title of a 1983 paper by Edward Leamer in the *American Economic Review*.] And that to me is the objectivity part of it. In the process of doing research you state your assumptions clearly, you build your model clearly, you share data, and you look for replication of results.” In fact, the only economist we interviewed who seriously doubted whether economic research is objective is

a 1960s era radical – profiled in more detail below – who barely completed his degree because he saw free market assumptions to be “bullshit.” He now teaches at a community college in California and does no research.

As several of these quotations suggest, however, economists do recognize that when they move from analysis of the workings of the economy into the formulation of policy prescriptions they may then be entering the realm of politics and political values. It is here, at the distinction between pure and applied economics, that economists mark the boundary between science and politics. A 40-year old professor of economics was engaged in this kind of boundary work when she said, “my research is completely away from politics. So far it has looked at marital transactions in India. So the only place where it would even remotely come close to politics would be where I formulate policies or I suggest ways to decrease marital transactions.” In a similar vein, another economist told us that because his policy work in the area of sports economics is motivated by his personal political view that “government is involved in too many different things, too many different areas” (as he sees it municipalities should not be subsidizing the building of sports arenas), this was one area where his politics and academic work did intersect. Economists do not appear to believe that policy work is *necessarily* political – if it is strictly informed by economic theory and research it need not be – but at the very least there is potential for political considerations to enter in.

American sociologists, for their part, are positioned somewhere between literature and economics in terms of the knowledge-politics problem. As many observers have noted, sociology is a multiparadigmatic and fractious discipline composed of researchers focused on a wide array of problems and employing diverse theoretical approaches and methodologies. One important dividing line in the field is between sociologists who identify more with the humanities and those

who view the discipline as a social science; another is between sociologists committed to an activist agenda and those who have more of a “professional” orientation. In tabulating the responses of sociologists to questions about objectivity and political-neutrality, I found that nearly two thirds do think critically about these notions – but that only one third believe objectivity is a chimera. The roughly one third of sociologists who believe objectivity is impossible tend to be either in the humanistic or activist camp or both, and are remarkably similar in their epistemological views to professors of literature – with the difference being that their perspectives seem informed more by pedestrian “standpoint theories” than by more philosophically sophisticated intellectual approaches. In this regard, when we asked an assistant professor of sociology whether her research is influenced by her politics, she said, “the personal is political. When I teach research methods I tell my students, ‘if we were all honest we would admit to the fact that we all study is based on that which affects us.’ I study fringe groups and issues of power... I was born in the projects. We were the only whites and the only Jews in an all-Hispanic, black area. We were regularly beaten. So for me issues of fringe groups and power are important, plus I’m gay. What other ways could I be more powerless?... So absolutely, my political, social, personal experiences literally shape my research.” Another female sociologist, a 37-year old assistant professor, similarly told us, “I think that knowledge is inherently political and subjective, and so the idea that there’s... knowledge out there that’s not positioned somehow is really... difficult for me to think about. I think that all theories come from a place of politics and a particular kind of subjectivity.” For these interviewees, research and politics are intertwined not simply in the sense famously outlined by Max Weber – that one’s choice of research topic is inevitably influenced by one’s values and interests – but as well in the deeper sense that one’s personal experiences and value commitments give one a worldview through

which research problems are framed and in which different theoretical approaches and empirical claims gain varying degrees of plausibility.

But this was not the dominant epistemological position among the sociologists we interviewed. Ben Agger (2007:4), a sociologist who has criticized the discipline from the perspective of deconstructionist theory, has argued that the epistemic culture of the field “attempt[s] to imitate the natural sciences in a ‘hard’ objectivity and indubitability.” It may be the case, as Agger argues to substantiate this claim, that the literary conventions of sociological writing in the major academic journals are wrapped up with the performance of a certain kind of objectivity, but I found in my interviews that the majority of sociologists are aware of the many problems and difficulties associated with objectivity. Unwilling, however, to descend into subjectivism, they have forged and now inhabit a hybrid epistemological culture in which objectivity as a view from nowhere is seen as impossible to achieve in practice, but is still held up as a kind of goal, and where research is understood as being more objective the more researchers acknowledge and come to terms with their own biases and motivations. For most American sociologists, in other words, objectivity – and as part of this knowledge that is politically-value free in its factual, though not motivational aspect – remains an ideal toward which they strive, even as they recognize the impossibility of ever fully achieving it. Typical in this regard was a 57-year old African-American sociologist teaching in the South. When we asked how his politics affect his research, he replied: “Well, just in terms of orienting me towards certain topics. Racial identity, racial reparations, health disparities, HIV/AIDS are all problems that affect people in urban centers and African-Americans and other groups of color, so my politics orient me towards certain topics.” He was quick to add that nevertheless, “I try to be balanced in my analyses.” Does “balance” mean that he considers the results of his research –

what he finds after his political and other values have steered him toward a given topic – to be objective? Although this sociologist considers objectivity to be “very important,” he also insisted that “it’s an ideal type – you know, it’s really impossible for humans to be totally objective, but it’s a goal... [W]e should strive for objectivity.” A 41-year old assistant professor of sociology who also teaches in the South said much the same thing while working to position himself as morally superior to sociologists of an activist bent who in his view do not take objectivity seriously enough. His own politics, he told us, which he characterized as moderate, don’t factor into his research in the sense that “I definitely never go into research looking for certain outcomes. I think there's a tendency in social science for people to do the kind of work that is going to substantiate their political beliefs. I never do that.” For him, “objectivity is critical to social science. I think it's critical to sociology. I think it's lacking... to a great extent within sociology.” “What it means to me,” he continued, “is that researchers follow a rigorous scientific method to carry out their research.” But he too added the crucial caveat that distinguishes sociological views of objectivity from those found in more purely objectivist epistemological cultures: “Don't get me wrong, it's never going to be perfect. But we can at least try.”

My interview data do not allow me to determine the extent to which these nods to the problems of achieving objective knowledge in the social sciences are linked to any *meaningful* reflexive practices on the part of sociologists – or whether, if pressed on the point, biologists, engineers, and economists might not also acknowledge that objectivity is difficult to achieve, if perhaps for different reasons than would concern sociologists. But they do permit the preliminary conclusion that the epistemic culture of sociology is a hybrid one both in the sense that some champions of skepticism and subjectivism can be found in its ranks (though they do not tend to occupy positions of greatest power in the field), and that among the rest acknowledgement of the

difficulty of being objective – coupled with a commitment to grasp for it nevertheless – is *de rigueur*.

## POLITICAL NEUTRALITY VERSUS TRANSPARENCY IN TEACHING

In light of these differences in how fields respond to the knowledge-politics problem when it comes to research, I expected to find parallel differences by field in terms of teaching. I expected that professors of literature would readily admit to the role that their personal politics play in their own pedagogy and would express no great concern about this; that sociologists would acknowledge the influence of politics but that most would endeavor to minimize it; and that professors inhabiting more objectivistic disciplinary cultures would deny that politics affects their teaching at all. This is not what I found. There were differences among my interviewees in how they conceived of the politics-teaching nexus, but these differences could not be easily mapped onto views of research, and did not follow automatically from disciplinary location.

Nearly all interviewees distanced themselves from professors who would impose their political views on students by grandstanding in the classroom or forcing students in their assignments to express political agreement with them. Beyond that, however, interviewees divided into two main camps. The first consisted of professors who either think their politics do not factor into their teaching because the subject matter of their courses does not allow for it, or who endeavor to conceal their political views from students even when controversial issues do arise on the grounds that doing so leads to better learning outcomes, like more meaningful student engagement. The teaching style of these professors can be described as one of “political neutrality.” The second camp consists of professors who recognize the many ways in which their teaching is bound up with their politics, and who think it is fine and good for professors to share

their personal political views with students – as long as they are clear about defining them as such and not as “truth,” and as long as they are open to dissenting student opinion. The teaching style of professors in this second camp is one of “political transparency.” Biologists and engineers were somewhat more likely than sociologists or professors of literature to say that the subject matter of their courses did not touch on the political, but disciplinary location is not a strong predictor of political neutrality versus transparency because the majority of biologists and engineers taught courses that went beyond basic principles and research findings to intersect at least at the margins with questions of public policy or matters of political controversy, forcing them to stake out a position on one side or the other on these sticky pedagogical matters.

Although none of my interviewees mentioned critical pedagogy per se there were a couple who fit the stereotype held by some conservative critics of a radical professor bent on converting students to his political point of view. Dave, the 68-year-old economist mentioned above who described free market economics as “bullshit,” is an example. Dave grew up in Beverly Hills. His father, who’d dropped out of school in the fourth grade, worked his way up and eventually came to run a successful defense contracting business. Raised in a conservative household by what he characterizes as “nouveau riche” parents – his father, he told us, “voted for Roosevelt first, and then after he got some money decided that Roosevelt wasn’t the way to go” – Dave “went to college carrying all those conservative views and... racial prejudices... and I started learning. I got to be more and more liberal and... involved with the possibilities that society could change and be better. I was like everybody else in the 60s. I’m the same age as The Beatles and we rejected a whole bunch of things.” He retained these political views over the years. Dave now describes his political identity as “left-wing liberal,” and when we asked him to elaborate on the meaning of this he laughed and said, “well, I’m a 60s guy. I was in the streets

with the long hair!” Although he went to graduate school for economics, he told us that thinks of himself as “more of a sociologist” – presumably because of what he takes to be sociology’s suspicion toward *homoeconomicus*, the sociological insistence that economic exchange is always embedded in social and institutional relationships, and the sense that sociologists do not equate a free market with a good society. Dave’s goal in teaching is to expose his students to his liberal, political-economy centered point of view in the hope that they will come to see the world differently than they did before and become more aware of social injustice. When he was in college an influential professor had asked him, speaking of the conservative views on which he’d been reared, “Why do you believe all that stuff?” and Dave aims to play the same role for his students. “I think there is a place for getting out the liberal, radical type message,” he told us. “I think the place of the university is to expose people to different things – not what they’re used to.” When we asked him to describe for us the ways in which he’s involved in politics these days he said, “I start in the classroom... and do what I can.” One of his main teaching techniques is to bring to class magazine and newspaper articles that he can discuss. “I bring in articles all the time,” he says – articles that are “pro-environmental, pro-egalitarian, pro-human rights, anti-war... and I do that with no excuses because they [his students] get plenty of the other stuff... Just listen to the radio sometime on these right-wing talk shows. Whoa. Drives ya nuts.” Beyond that, Dave helps to organize a “political economy” week at the college during which classes are cancelled and students come to hear speakers debate the merits of various political agendas and proposals. For his highly politicized approach to teaching Dave has gotten into trouble with students and parents over the years. “They call me ‘pinko fag’ and all that shit... Parents would come and say, ‘You’re brainwashing my child...’ And I just come back and say, ‘Well, what can I say? I don’t have to check with you before I say anything.’” Dave opposes forcing his students

to agree with his politics on tests, and says he encourages debate with conservative students, but he is unapologetic for his belief that college is a place where students raised in conservative families can be led to see the error of their ways.

Dave's pedagogical views were uncommon among my interviewees. The vast majority held more conventional beliefs about the aim of undergraduate instruction, seeing it as concerned to transmit to students knowledge of a field, give them familiarity with some of the major issues and debates confronting humankind today, expose them to classic texts and ideas and works of art, or inculcate skills like writing and reading well and thinking analytically and critically. On the basis of informal conversations I've had with many professors over the years, I suspect that some of my interviewees harbored secret hopes that the achievement of these conventional pedagogical aims would result indirectly in political movement to the left on the part of students, but few spoke of this explicitly. Instead, nearly all approached politics and teaching through stances of political neutrality or transparency.

The professors we interviewed who could be placed on the political neutrality side of the divide can in fact be divided once again. Some taught classes that they understood to be politically neutral in the sense that the subject matter of their courses did not bring them into a political orbit. Such professors can be seen as practicing "accidental political neutrality." As they talk about it, it is an accident of fate, a function of their particular specialization and the classes they've been assigned, that politics plays no role in their teaching, as in the case of a 48-year old professor of mechanical engineering who thought it a sufficient explanation of why politics doesn't intersect with his teaching to point out, with no further elaboration, that his classes are "in the area of what's called 'mechtronics' – it's a combin[ation] of mechanical engineering and electronics... computer science for designing smarter, more reliable, adaptable products." A

recent survey by Smith, Mayer, and Fritschler (2008:84) found that about 60 percent of American professors agree with the statement, “politics seldom comes up in my classroom, because of the nature of the subjects I teach,” suggesting that, in the university overall, accidental political neutrality may be the modal pedagogical category when it comes to knowledge-politics.

The second category consists of professors who practice what I call “cultivated political neutrality.” It is not that such professors endeavor to keep politics from being discussed in their classes; some teach on highly politicized topics, and encourage political debate. Rather, what distinguishes this pedagogical style is the effort to ensure that no matter the nature of the classroom conversation, the instructors’ own political views will remain hidden or at least elusive.

Two assumptions seemed to be at work for professors in this category. The first is that college students are impressionable and that professors yield considerable authority in the classroom. To the extent that this is so, if a professor is outspoken about her own views it may poison classroom discussion or otherwise interfere with the process by which students consider all sides in a debate and come to rationally form their own beliefs. Second, it is unethical for professors to reveal and argue for their own political views in class because in doing so they in effect are using their authority not for the purposes for which it was granted – to instruct – but for political ends. A 56-year old professor of literature with “generally liberal” views who teaches in a Catholic college in the midwest was typical of those interviewees who claimed to practice cultivated political neutrality, though the language he used in describing his rationale for doing so was unusually lighthearted. “How if at all do your politics factor into your teaching?” we asked him. “I try to keep it out of my teaching,” he replied. “For example, I teach Conrad. And there is a political argument about imperialism that it is possible to make and I try to make it

from all sides... and be as objective as I can be. But as far as bringing my politics – contemporary politics – into the classroom, I try to leave it out. I’ve always felt that was obnoxious... I do make an effort to be receptive to all kinds of ideas... But I think it’s important that [students] get the education they paid for... and not some sort of radicalization camp.” More vehement was the Virginia-trained economist quoted earlier who could not understand how economics could be considered political. We asked him later in the interview whether he felt it was acceptable for professors to argue on behalf of their own political views in class. His response was: “Absolutely not... I have some ethical problems with that [because it]... doesn’t translate well into imparting critical thinking skills for students. I very strongly believe that 18- to 22-year-old college students have a very strong incentive to do whatever they need to do to make the professor happy, and there are certainly perceptions out there that Professor X wants to hear this or that on an exam or wants you to read this into an essay... Now, I think that most of my students, if they would bother stopping by my office or talking to me... they could have a pretty good guess at my political beliefs, but in terms of bringing any of that into the classroom, I try very, very hard to avoid that.”

In contrast, many professors we spoke to practice “political transparency” with their students. If the topic of the class on a given day calls for discussion of political issues – which it may or may not, as those who practice political transparency are distinguished from practitioners of critical pedagogy in part by the fact that they do *not* feel the need to bring every discussion around to contemporary politics – they may, if they deem it pedagogically helpful, reveal to students what their own views are while also working to ensure that this does not foreclose discussion. For example, a 47-year old sociological social psychologist who teaches at a community college in California told us that her liberal views do affect the way she teaches. As

she sees it, her politics “factor... in [to her teaching] by the topics that I might address.” Viewing sociology as synonymous with the study of unequal distributions of power and resources in society, she elaborated by saying, “I’m a sociologist. I’m going to talk about race and racism. I’m going to talk about sex and sexism. I’m going to talk about social inequality and class in the United States.” When she raises such matters, however, she attempts neither to directly divest students of their conservative views nor to conceal from them her own position. “I really try to be inclusive,” she told us. “I don’t try to push a particular agenda or a candidate or anything like that. If I find that I have said [something to this effect], I will quickly... say, ‘You know, this is just my personal opinion and I respect anybody else’s opinion and you don’t have to agree with me in order to understand the material that I’m trying to convey to you.’” By issuing such a disclaimer she hopes to communicate to students that her political statements are not to be construed as reflecting the authoritative knowledge she has as a sociologist, but are simply the views she has as a fellow citizen. This move, she hopes, goes some way toward removing whatever power asymmetries might otherwise be present in the classroom situation, and she takes it as evidence that her strategy works that over the years she has had no real conflicts with students over politics: “I remember having discussions with students whose politics were different than my own,” she says. These discussions might have become “heated” on occasion, but they ended up being “illuminating” for all concerned because her approach is ultimately “one of allowing and dignifying the other person’s perspective.” The operative assumption about students for practitioners of political transparency is that they are not delicate young things prone to indoctrination, but critical consumers of information and opinion who can understand where professorial authority ends and personal political views begin, and who are capable of taking part as equals with their professors and fellow students in wide ranging and probing discussion of

political matters. Thus it was that an English professor who teaches at a public four year school in Pennsylvania justified his assertion that it was fine for him to present and argue for his own political views by claiming that students are not going to accept them as gospel: “The students are not stupid, you know? They’re human just like the rest of us!” In the same vein, another literature professor told us he doesn’t have conflicts with students over politics because his goal in classroom discussions isn’t to “win... them over” politically, but simply to get them to “argue and think about what their position is.”

Examining how my interviewees break down in terms of these profiles reveals that – again – two of the fifty seven professors in the sample (3.5 percent) were practitioners of critical pedagogy, ten (15.8 percent) said they teach in fields or on topics where political issues never arise, eleven (19.3 percent) said that professors should not divulge their political views in the classroom, and the rest (61.4 percent) practiced political transparency to a greater or lesser degree.

Multivariate statistical analysis is unhelpful on a sample of this size, but the bivariate distributions are intriguing. Some differences by discipline are apparent, as I have already suggested and as Table 2 indicates. Biologists and engineers were more likely than sociologists, literature professors, or economists to claim to teach classes that never touch on political issues, though only a third of professors in these two fields could be classified as claiming “accidental neutrality.” Cultivated neutrality was practiced by a third of engineers and economists, but by only 7 percent of sociologists, 10 percent of biologists, and 14.3 percent of literature professors. Political transparency was equally common among sociologists and literature professors – 78.6 percent in both fields – but also relatively high among biologists (60 percent) and economists (50 percent). There was also variation by institutional location: half of professors teaching in

doctoral granting universities practiced cultivated neutrality, as compared to around ten percent of professors teaching in community colleges or four year schools. This may reflect the greater authority that professors at elite institutions understand themselves to have – an authority that may lead them to be especially wary of indoctrination – or the lesser intimacy that typically obtains in such institutions between students and instructors, factors that could have come to influence the cross-disciplinary teaching cultures of such schools. Professors’ own political views also appear to affect their likelihood of adopting one stance or another. Self-identified moderates were more likely to practice cultivated neutrality (25 percent) than conservatives (20 percent) or liberals (11.8 percent), perhaps because their moderatism reflects recognition that no side in a political debate holds a monopoly on truth, which has as a possible pedagogical implication that nothing should be allowed to interfere with the process by which students sift and winnow through various truth claims for themselves. Finally, these pedagogical practices appear gendered: whereas 25.6 percent of male professors practice cultivated neutrality, this was true for only 5.6 percent of women. While possibly reflective of the differential distribution of men and women in different fields and types of institutions, this may also reflect larger differences between male and female academics in terms of their experiences with and orientations toward teaching, and in particular the fact that women tend to have less hierarchical relationships with students than do their male colleagues.

Table 2 about here

## CONCEPTIONS OF ACADEMIC FREEDOM

In light of these differences in how the knowledge-politics problem gets resolved with regard to

research and teaching, a third empirical issue is worth considering: how American professors today understand the concept of academic freedom, a concept whose institutionalization is what allows professors any space to deviate in scientific, intellectual, political, or religious terms from the expectations of their employers. Many of the answers we received to the question we posed about the meaning of academic freedom were short, halting, and unelaborated. This could signify a problem with the wording of the question, the fact that it was asked relatively late in the interview, or a sense among interviewees that the meaning of the term is so obvious that describing it in shorthand should suffice. Alternatively, it could reflect what I suspect to be the case: that most professors simply have not given all that much thought to the concept. Although about twenty percent of American professors reported on the survey Simmons and I conducted that their academic freedom had somehow been threatened in the last few years, there is scant discussion of the topic in the academic community. Academic freedom is a marginal subject in legal scholarship and political philosophy and is rarely discussed as part of graduate student training or in the context of continuing education efforts sponsored by national disciplinary societies. Recently, as conservative critics of the university have stepped up their efforts, a number of hastily mounted conferences on academic freedom have been staged and a few edited volumes have appeared (e.g. Doumani 2006; Gerstmann and Streb 2006.) But it is an indication that interest in academic freedom has waned in recent decades that membership levels in the AAUP dropped off dramatically in the mid 1980s and never recovered (see Figure 1).

Figure 1 about here

This point aside, I found that my interviewees clustered into two broad groups when it came to understandings of academic freedom. The first consisted of those who thought that academic freedom granted them the right to work on any topic of their choosing, to say about it anything they might like, or to otherwise express themselves freely in print, in lecture, or in other settings – a view often linked to politicized understandings of academic inquiry. An associate professor of literature who teaches at a 4-year college in the Northeast exemplified this view. When we asked what academic freedom meant to her, she responded: “It is the ability to do the research that we think is significant, and be free to follow that research or follow the findings wherever they take you, and not be afraid to publish what you find... Really being able to go out on a limb and take something on, take on an intellectual question, without fears of reprisal, either from your department or your university, or the economy at large. And that seems to be happening more lately, that there are more reprisals for positionings.” When we asked her to give an example of how this had played out in her own life, she told us, “when I was on the job market, because I wrote on a set of what were called radical novels... I took a lot of heat for working on what I did, some of my interviews were very confrontational.” The interviewer asked her to elaborate. Was this confrontation over the political nature of the subject matter? “Yeah,” she said. “Why these particular novels should even be worked on, because they were somewhat marginal – a lot of criticism of my methodology being too ideologically driven. And a lot of questions about the value of interdisciplinary work, and whether it was possible to do it in a thorough way.” Although she acknowledges that questions about interdisciplinarity might have some merit, she considers it a violation of her academic freedom – and not simply reasoned judgment by a scholarly community – that she was passed over for a job because of the topic on which she chose to write her dissertation. As she sees it, academic freedom gives her the right to

“position” herself however she chooses on political-intellectual matters, and should protect her against the charge of doing work that is too “ideological.”

In a recent essay, legal scholar Robert Post (2006) charges that American academics today, immersed in a culture of rights, have forgotten the original meaning of academic freedom – as the freedom to pursue scientific truth in one’s area of research unimpeded by nonscholarly considerations – and have reimagined it as a kind of First Amendment protection to say in their classrooms and on the printed page anything they like, no matter how overtly political or disconnected from serious scholarship it may be. I didn’t find any interviewees who explicitly connected up notions of academic freedom with the First Amendment, but I did find many who believed that academic freedom granted them the right not simply to work on any topic of their choosing, but more generally to have largely unrestricted speech rights in their capacity as professors. For example, an 81-year-old biologist – my oldest interviewee – who teaches at a Catholic college in the Northeast defined academic freedom as: “you should be free to say whatever you want to say, within reason, and you don't lose your job as a result of it.” Interviewees who thought of academic freedom as the right to work on whatever topic they choose or to say whatever they like varied as to whether they emphasized academic freedom in teaching or research or broader public engagement, but were united in viewing it as a right that carries with it few limitations.

Another – larger – group of interviewees, however, saw academic freedom in terms consistent with its original definition: as a professional prerogative intimately bound up with responsibilities. A typical comment in this vein came from a 55-year-old sociologist who teaches at a doctoral granting university in the Northeast. As he sees it, academic freedom means that “I have a responsibility to act ethically and principled [sic] in my approach to my work. And,

provided that I'm acting according to the ethical codes of my discipline, and my department, and my institution, I should be able to conduct my work as I see fit. And no one should be able to tell me that I can't do that research project or I can't teach from that book." A 47-year-old electrical engineer who studies nanotechnology expressed a similar view while tying academic freedom to notions of objectivity: "Academic freedom means...as far as research goes that I pursue a research direction that I think is important and... valid without someone else telling me what I should and shouldn't do.... That I try to be as objective as possible in my research, and I publish those results no matter how controversial they are. Now, in engineering, there's not a lot of controversial things, but sometimes... there are. But whatever it would be... if the results are controversial and cause some people to be uncomfortable, well, so be it." Whereas professors with a rights-oriented view of academic freedom tended not to contextualize the concept in terms of the social function of the academic profession or acknowledge any substantive limitations or correlative duties, professors with a prerogative-oriented view spontaneously did all of these things. Several also expressed concern about their colleagues who had a more rights-oriented view, who in consequence had politicized academic discourse, and who had, paradoxically, helped to create a climate on campus that seemed to them decidedly unfree. This view was taken by a 46-year-old literature professor. Defining academic freedom as "the ability to pursue scholarly interests, regardless of where they may lead; to do so rigorously and fairly and objectively," this interviewee said that the only threat to his academic freedom had come "from the Fascist Left inside the faculty, not where we traditionally assume it comes from, from outside forces wanting to squelch unpopular views."

Classifying respondents into three categories depending on whether they described academic freedom primarily in terms of rights, primarily in terms of prerogatives and duties, or

somewhere between the two, I found that about 32 percent fell into the first category, 47 percent into the second, and about 21 percent into the third. Looking at the bivariate distributions, the only evident disciplinary differences are that those with a rights-oriented view are overrepresented among literature professors (50 percent) while those with a prerogative-oriented view are overrepresented among economists (62.5 percent). In terms of institutional status, professors at doctoral-granting universities were more likely to hold a prerogative view of academic freedom. There were few other obvious sociodemographic or institutional correlates, but I did find a strong association with views on politics and teaching: none of the professors who claimed to practice “cultivated neutrality” in their classrooms had a rights-oriented perspective on academic freedom.

## CONCLUSION

My aim in this chapter was to paint a portrait of how American professors in five disciplinary fields think about the knowledge-politics problem – about whether and how their own political values and views should enter into their research and teaching practices, and, as a corollary, the nature of their understandings of academic freedom. This is not the first study to address such issues. As indicated previously, historical work on a number of disciplinary fields, research on science activism, case studies of intellectuals, and other scholarship has explored professors’ views on the question of whether objective, value-free knowledge is possible and/or desirable. Similarly, research on teaching practices in American colleges and universities – though dominated by the concerns of higher education scholars around issues of student engagement – has sometimes considered the connection between professors’ politics and their pedagogy (e.g., Colby et al 2007). Yet most of these strands of investigation stop short of systematic cross-

disciplinary comparison, and fail to problematize explicitly the dimension of epistemic culture that is their common object of inquiry. An interview-based study of five disciplines at one point in time obviously cannot answer the question of how all American professors think about the relationship between knowledge and politics. Nevertheless, the chapter opens a window onto an important aspect of the complex cultural worlds that contemporary American academics inhabit – an aspect that has become an object of vigorous contestation in the public sphere. Future research could profitably extend this analysis by expanding its scope to cover other fields and other temporal, institutional, or national contexts; by identifying the cultural, structural, and institutional factors responsible for variation in views of knowledge-politics; and by considering how such views may ramify out to shape intellectual and political practice.

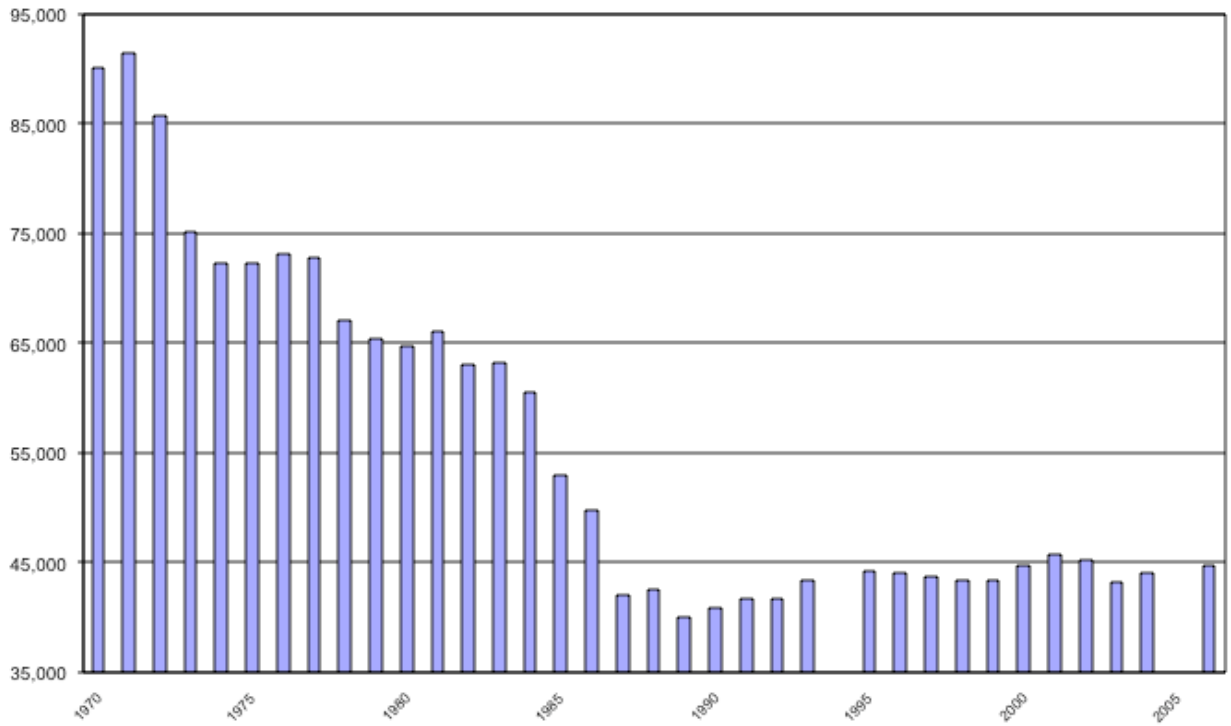
Although I cannot substantiate the claim here, my view is that the epistemological skepticism I found among professors of literature – a skepticism that, on some accounts, appeared on the scene in the 1970s and 1980s and quickly spread, becoming institutionalized in a number of humanities and humanistic social science fields (Cusset 2008; Lamont 1987) – was one among a number of factors that helped to stimulate the most recent round of conservative critique of American higher education. This was so not because conservative critics were worried about postmodernism and allied intellectual movements per se (though some were) but because the widespread rejection of notions of objectivity and value-neutrality that such movements sanctioned, and the explicit politicization of research they opened up, undermined the legitimacy of the academic enterprise in the view of key constituencies of the conservative movement. If this is correct, then understanding how such fields became positioned as they were and are on matters of knowledge-politics while other fields retained their objectivistic orientation will be important not just from the standpoint of intellectual history, but as well for those who are

interested in understanding the full range of institutional challenges presently faced by the American academic profession.

<b>Table 1. Select Sample Characteristics</b>					
<i>Field</i>	<i>Men</i>	<i>Women</i>	<i>Percent at rank of assistant professor</i>	<i>Median age</i>	<i>Percent liberal*</i>
Sociology	8	6	57.1	48	85.7
Biology	6	4	10	52.5	50
Literature	9	5	21.4	50.2	85.7
Engineering	10	1	27.3	48	18.2
Economics	6	2	0	52.5	37.5
<i>Institution type</i>	<i>Percent</i>		<i>Region</i>	<i>Percent</i>	
Comm. College	17.5		West	25.8	
4 year	64.9		Midwest	28.8	
PhD-granting	17.5		Northeast	25.8	
			South	20	
Percentages may not add to 100 because of rounding.					
* Versus moderate or conservative					

<i>Field</i>	<i>Critical pedagogy</i>	<i>Accidental neutrality</i>	<i>Cultivated neutrality</i>	<i>Political transparency</i>
Sociology	7.1	7.1	7.1	78.6
Biology	0	30	10	60
Literature	0	7.1	14.3	78.6
Engineering	0	36.4	36.4	27.3
Economics	12.5	0	37.5	50
Percentages may not add to 100 because of rounding.				

Figure 1. AAUP Membership, 1970-2006



Data courtesy of AAUP. Membership numbers unavailable for 1994 and 2005.

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