

EXPLAINING PROFESSORS' POLITICS: AN INDIRECT TEST
OF THE SELF-SELECTION HYPOTHESIS

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Although varying in theoretical orientation and substantive focus, all sociological research on diversity and higher education is concerned with the questions of why and how certain social groups come to be underrepresented in higher education institutions, and other groups overrepresented—and with what consequences. Most such work, undertaken by scholars of inequality, examines the underrepresentation in college or university settings of disadvantaged groups like the working class or people of color. Yet insofar as this work aims to identify general social mechanisms that contribute to the reproduction of inequality, it stands to benefit from dialogue with a broader tradition of scholarship concerned to understand the wide variety of social processes, from the enactment of closure strategies (Weeden 2002) to ethnic niching and enclave formation (Portes and Manning 1986; Waldinger and Der-Martirosian 2001), from the social psychology of homophily (McPherson, Smith-Lovin, and Cook 2001) to the operation of vacancy chains (Chase 1991; White 1970), by which slots in formal organizations and labor

markets come to be occupied by particular kinds of actors, whether or not those patterns reflect dynamics of stratification.

This chapter reports the results of an empirical study in this broader tradition that nevertheless remains focused on higher education. Of the many distinguishing features of American higher education institutions, one of the most commented upon in the public sphere today is that their core personnel—professors—tend to hold social and political views considerably to the left of other Americans. Although the political radicalism of professors has often been overstated by conservative commentators, numerous studies show that, relative to the U.S. population as a whole, liberals are significantly overrepresented in the ranks of the professoriate, while conservatives are underrepresented (Gross and Simmons 2007; Rothman, Lichter, and Nevitte 2005). What explains this tendency, which may be consequential for teaching and research practices, the involvement of professors in policy-making, and public perceptions of the legitimacy of the higher education enterprise?

Over the years sociologists have proposed many answers. In a recent paper, Fosse and Gross (2010) tested several established theories of professorial liberalism against one another using data from the General Social Survey (GSS), attempting to account statistically for the distinctive political views of the 326 GSS respondents between 1974 and 2008 who worked as professors. Reflecting on the results of their empirical analysis, Fosse and Gross went on to theorize that the phenomenon of professorial liberalism may be best explained as a function of the greater self-selection of liberals into academia given the occupation's institutionalized political reputation—a theory their data did not permit them to test directly.

The study we report here is an indirect test of Fosse and Gross's theory. As compared to several other leading theories of professorial liberalism, the self-selection hypothesis implies a

distinctive temporal pattern in professors' experiences of political formation: it suggests their typically liberal politics should develop and stabilize *before* graduate school and entry into the academic profession, not during the course of their training and professional socialization, and not because of their class interests upon becoming academics. Although we are aware of the limitations of retrospective data, we seek evidence of such a temporal pattern—and preliminary support for the theory—in qualitative interviews with sixty-six professors in six disciplinary fields. Respondents were asked to tell the story of how they developed their politics. On the whole the narratives offered were more consistent with the theory of self-selection than with others.

Our chapter unfolds in four sections. In the first we describe the politics of American professors and introduce the two families of theory we will be examining against the self-selection approach. In the second section we discuss our analytic strategy and methodology. In the third we present our core findings, and in the final section we consider the implications for scholarship on diversity and higher education.

THE LIBERALISM OF AMERICAN PROFESSORS

For much of their history American colleges and universities have been conservative institutions from the point of view of ties to economic and religious elites, social exclusivity, the credentialing function served for upper-middle-class students, and the nature of campus culture. However, by the mid-twentieth century it became apparent that at least one crucial group on campus—the professoriate—“consistently lean[s]... to the left” (Ladd and Lipset 1976:15). One of the earliest pieces of survey research to speak to the issue, a 1937 study of Chicago residents, found overwhelming support for the New Deal among professors (Kornhauser 1938). Eighteen

years later, at the height of McCarthyism, a nationwide survey of social scientists revealed few communists but that 75 percent of respondents were registered Democrats (Lazarsfeld and Thielens 1958). Reviewing these and other studies for his book, *Political Man* (1960), Seymour Martin Lipset concluded that academic liberalism was of a piece with the politics of intellectuals more generally, and was so significant as to warrant further investigation. Taking up his own call, Lipset authored several books and many articles about faculty politics in the early 1970s. In the most important of these, *The Divided Academy* (1976), coauthored with Everett Carl Ladd, Lipset analyzed data from a new large-scale survey of American professors in all disciplinary fields to show that 46 percent could be classified as left or liberal, 27 percent as middle of the road, and 28 percent conservative, with younger faculty more liberal than older. Academics in the late 1960s were no more liberal than most college students at the time, Ladd and Lipset pointed out, but in terms of their views of economic redistribution, government regulation of business, civil liberties, minority rights, the war in Vietnam, and other matters, they were, on average, far more liberal than other Americans.

More recent research shows that this is still true, and that there has been even further movement left since the 1960s.¹ In 2006, Gross and Simmons carried out a nationally-representative survey of professors in all fields and types of institutions. 62.2 percent of their respondents characterized themselves as more or less liberal, 18 percent as middle of the road, and 19.7 percent as conservative. Gross and Simmons argued that professors who self-identified as slightly liberal or slightly conservative should be coded as moderates, which changes the distribution to 44.1 percent liberal, 46.6 percent moderate, and 9.2 percent conservative. But

¹ The meanings of liberalism and conservatism, and of affiliation with the Democratic and Republican parties, have obviously changed over time, rendering simple numeric comparisons to previous decades problematic.

analysis of attitudes items showed that while real differences could be found between respondents in the newly defined liberal and moderate camps, academic moderates were still more liberal than moderates in American society as a whole. At the same time, even with the corrected coding scheme liberals remained overrepresented in the academic ranks (relative to their prevalence in the general population) by nearly 30 percentage points, with conservatives underrepresented by more than 10 points. In terms of party affiliation, Democrats comprised 51 percent of all professors, while Republicans made up a scant 13.7 percent. Among professors who were Independents, Democratic-leaning outnumbered Republican-leaning by a margin of more than 2:1. Not surprisingly, professors also reported voting for Democratic candidates in overwhelming numbers. For example, of those respondents who reported voting in the 2004 presidential election, 77.6 percent reported that they voted for John Kerry, and just 20.4 percent for George Bush (with the rest supporting third party candidates).

Like other scholars before them, Gross and Simmons found two significant axes of variation in professorial politics. The political commitments of American faculty members vary by field, with greater liberalism in the traditional humanities/social sciences/natural sciences core and less in more applied fields; and there is also variation by type of institution, with faculty at liberal arts colleges and elite Ph.D. granting schools the most liberal. This variation aside, there is clearly a remarkable concentration of those with left/liberal views in academia. While some research by sociologists, political scientists, intellectual historians, and higher education scholars asks whether this concentration has any consequences, the question we take up here is, what explains it?

As mentioned previously, numerous sociological theories have been floated to account for professors' liberal politics. These are reviewed systematically in the Fosse and Gross paper, but for purposes of our analysis three broad families of theory merit attention.

The first are theories of class politics. Since much classic scholarship on the sociology of intellectuals grew out of the Marxist tradition, it is hardly surprising that class figures centrally in many explanations of professorial liberalism. While a number of scholars use class-based approaches to explain historical and cross-national variation in the political sympathies of intellectuals (e.g. Karabel 1996), the main goal of the line of investigation we consider here is to account for the typically liberal views of professors and other knowledge workers in advanced industrial societies. Theorists like Gouldner (1979) and Konrad and Szelenyi (1979) viewed such workers, whose numbers have increased as a result of educational upgrading and sectoral shifts in the economy, as forming a distinctive "New Class." Although knowledge workers typically hail from relatively elite social backgrounds and occupy privileged positions in the labor market—factors that should predispose them to economic conservatism, according to traditional theories of class politics—Gouldner and Konrad and Szelenyi argued that their liberalism, tied to the scientific ethos, serves the important function of distinguishing them culturally from other classes and class fractions. It should therefore be seen as part of a strategy for amassing class power. When empirical research in the U.S. found little evidence of class coherence with the New Class defined broadly (Brint 1984), other theorists, like Lamont (1987, 1992), sought to rescue the concept. Lamont did so by suggesting that the tendency of New Class workers to be liberal is mediated by their proximity to the profit-making function, and that the direct material interests of some New Class members in greater state spending on education, the arts, social services, and so on, might better explain their liberal views. This research was about knowledge

workers, other white-collar workers, and intellectuals in general, but in it professors were often cited as a paradigmatic group.

Yet theories of the New Class are not the only ones to explain professors' politics in class-analytic terms. A second, widely influential approach is that of Bourdieu ([1984] 1988). Bourdieu argued that professors, along with writers, artists, journalists, and members of a select number of other occupations, are in the unusual position of possessing high levels of cultural capital but only modest levels of economic capital. Building on earlier American insights about status inconsistency (e.g., Goffman 1957) and longstanding ideas about the social marginality of intellectuals and its effects, Bourdieu theorized that this structural situation leads naturally to an embrace of liberalism, understood as sympathy for "dominated groups" in society, in part because intellectuals recognize "their own dominated status within the field of power" (Schwartz 1997:235).

Bourdieu argued that intellectuals' politics are not discrete attitudinal characteristics, but part and parcel of their broader intellectual habitus, or their whole manner of being as intellectuals. Although the political valence of the intellectual habitus is a function of social-structural characteristics, Bourdieu's theory would hold that the political views of any individual thinker are acquired over time as part of the process of gaining intellectual mastery. Insofar as this is so, Bourdieu's approach bleeds over into a second theoretical family: those perspectives that explain professorial liberalism in terms of professional socialization. The scholarship here is not as well developed as on class politics, but revolves around two core insights. First, notwithstanding attacks lodged against it by sociologists of scientific knowledge, Merton's (1979) argument that there is a distinctive normative structure to life in scientific and academic communities is not without merit. One feature of this structure flagged indirectly by Merton is

intellectual tolerance: many academics believe that, within reason, their colleagues should be allowed to advance whatever hypotheses or ideas they feel compelled by so that the academic community can sift and winnow a maximally diverse set of claims in the interests of having truth ultimately win out (see Cole 2010).² Since conservatives have often advocated limits on academic freedom, professors, in the course of learning the norms of science and academic inquiry, might naturally find themselves drawn toward liberalism (Ladd and Lipset 1976). The same point has been expressed in more historical terms by A.H. Halsey and Martin Trow (1971): “The predominantly ‘left-liberal’ climate of most academic communities.... has its roots in the historical links of modern scholarship with the empirical, secular, skeptical traditions of the Enlightenment, and its political expressions in liberalism and democratic socialism” (402). Second, whatever the reasons for baseline levels of liberalism in academe, the fact that the academic profession is relatively unique in requiring so many years of study for entry—and in consistently producing more aspirants than there are jobs—might increase liberalism above the baseline for two reasons. On the one hand, a lengthy socialization process and uncertain labor market might contribute to a culture of conformity in which any deviation from community standards, intellectual or otherwise, could become a source of marginalization (Menand 2010). On the other hand, such a process could promote the growth of closed and involuted social networks, a structural situation associated with tendencies toward attitudinal amplification and extremism (Sunstein 2009). For all these reasons, as well as for specific historical reasons pertaining to the post-1960s era (Hollander 1987), an occupational subculture has formed in academe in which liberalism is strongly normative. Professional socialization approaches tend to see the political aspects of this subculture as rooted in something other than class interest, and

² Conservative critics (e.g., Hamilton 1995) charge that academics do not live up to this ideal in practice.

stress that politics are part of the broader set of informal norms and practices that young people learn on their way toward becoming academics.

The goal of the Fosse and Gross article was to subject hypotheses drawn from these two families of theory—along with others we do not consider here—to empirical scrutiny. They found modest support for both. In terms of class politics, they found that the disjuncture between professors' levels of education and income, a key variable for Bourdieu, accounts for about 13 percent of the politics gap between professors and other Americans. However, compared to non-professors, professors are less likely to lack confidence in business—Fosse and Gross's measure of class differentiation pressures—so this variable did nothing to account for their politics. That a substantially higher percentage of professors than non-professors hold positions in the public sector, and have material interests in greater state spending, likewise accounted for little of their political views. As for theories of professional socialization, the only claim that could be tested with the available data was that professors' greater tolerance for controversial ideas explains some of their politics. Fosse and Gross found that their measure of this narrowed the politics gap by about 10 percent. What mattered more than variables associated with either theoretical family was a simple measure of educational attainment. The fact that professors have substantially higher rates of advanced degree holding than other Americans accounted for about 20 percent of the political gap in their models. The greater tendency of professors to be Jews, religiously unaffiliated, and theologically liberal or moderate Protestants together accounted for another 14 percent. Interaction terms with the education variable had even larger coefficients. These and other variables accounted for more than 40 percent of the difference in political views between professors and non-professors.

In numeric terms this is a high level of explanatory power for a social science model. However, influenced by recent scholarship arguing that a social phenomenon cannot be considered explained unless the intermediary mechanisms bringing it about are identified (see Gross 2009), Fosse and Gross went on to propose a new theory of professorial liberalism intended to do just that. Without doubting that other theoretical approaches provide some traction, they argued, influenced by David Grusky's neo-Durkheimian approach to class analysis (see Grusky and Sorenson 1998; Grusky 2005; Weeden and Grusky 2005), that professorial liberalism stems mostly from occupational reputation-based self-selection. As a result of a variety of sociohistorical processes, Fosse and Gross argued, from the original "public dramas" (Gusfield 1984) over academic freedom early in the twentieth century to the ties between higher education and radical social movements in the 1960s and 1970s, academe has developed a reputation for being welcoming of liberals, leftists, and secularists, and not particularly welcoming of conservatives and those with traditionally religious views. Given this reputation, which forms part of the social definition of the academic role, when politically-savvy young people form their educational and occupational aspirations, liberals and secularists are far more likely than conservatives and the very religious to want to become professors, and to work to complete the educational credentials—a PhD—that would allow them to do so. Fosse and Gross suggested that this process explained the robustness of the education and religion variables in their models, as well as the strength of a number of interaction terms with education, and that it might also account for some portion of the political gap their models left unexplained. They further mobilized the theory to explain political variation among professors, arguing that professorial liberalism should be greatest in elite institutions whose personnel are most expected

to embody the virtues definitive of the academic role, and in fields that have come to define themselves historically around leftist values and ideals.

ANALYTIC STRATEGY AND METHODOLOGY

Again, the theory of self-selection could not be tested directly with the GSS data on which Fosse and Gross relied. They therefore called for the analysis of longitudinal data that could be used to test it directly, and also for the carrying out of a number of indirect tests using other types of data. In this chapter we conduct an indirect test using data from in-depth interviews with American professors. In the interviews professors were asked to describe the process by which they came to form their political views. Timing in the life course is our key measurement concern. If theories of class politics are correct, professors' politics should form either after they become professors—when they have achieved the levels of cultural and economic capital that will define their adult social positions—or earlier in conjunction with acquisition of other aspects of their New Class or academic habitus. If theories of professional socialization are correct, political views should form during the course of professional training—graduate school, for most people—and/or become intensified subsequently. If the theory of self-selection is right, the political views of most professors should form well before they embark on the path toward becoming professors, and remain relatively stable from there on out.

The interviews we analyze to test these claims are followup interviews to the survey conducted by Gross and Simmons. Survey respondents were asked if they would agree to a phone interview designed to further explore their political views. For the interviews, part of a larger project on professors and politics, the decision was made to focus on professors in six important fields of study that, according to the survey, evidenced meaningful variation in faculty

politics across them: sociology and English, two liberal fields, and biology, economics, business, and engineering, fields with higher proportions of moderates and conservatives.³ Survey respondents in these fields who had agreed to an interview were quota sampled about a year after the completion of the survey, with the sampling procedure designed to ensure that professors from all types of institutions would ultimately be represented, and that women and men would be represented in roughly the same proportions as could be found in each field. About half of those contacted agreed to an interview. We were able to complete 66 interviews, speaking with 14 sociologists, 14 English professors, 10 biologists, 8 economists, 9 professors of business, and 11 engineers.⁴ Our sample is nonrandom, but there is no reason to think it unrepresentative.

Interviews were conducted by telephone, lasted an average of 48 minutes, and covered a range of topics. The segments of the transcripts we analyze here are mostly responses to the question, “Could you please tell me the story of how you came to form your political views?” These segments were first analyzed independently by two separate coders according to a preestablished coding scheme, with a special focus on timing. Transcript segments were coded for whether they spoke to political formation processes interviewees described having undergone in childhood, adolescence, early adulthood, or later in life, with multiple codes allowed for the same interviewee. Codes were also assigned for the specific factors interviewees cited as having shaped their politics. Upon completion of the first round of coding, discrepant cases were discussed to elaborate further coding rules, and the interviews were reanalyzed, this time achieving an intercoder reliability rate above 90 percent.

³ More applied fields like accounting and nursing were excluded, since we also wanted to assess variation across all types of institutions, and these applied fields are not always represented at elite, PhD granting universities. Because of space constraints we do not pay much attention to field differences in this chapter.

⁴ A sociodemographic profile of the interview sample is available from the authors.

Retrospective data such as these are obviously subject to distortion and recall bias. For example, they may be shaped by widely shared cultural narratives of political becoming that specify key junctures in the life course during which people are expected to form their political views, and that identify normatively appropriate motivations for political development. As Blee (2002) notes, discussing the methodological challenges inherent in analyzing life stories, such stories also serve to “integrate the various threads of life,” and, in “making the self coherent over time,” (33) may distort the biographical record in the service of the psychological motive of self-consistency. For these reasons, caution is in order when interpreting our findings—all the more so because the average age of professors is greater than that of workers in many other occupations (the mean age in our interview sample was 50), increasing the amount of time between recall and the events being recalled. At the same time, we do not think it impossible that professors could accurately remember when in their lives their politics crystallized—indeed, many of the recollections offered by our interviewees seem too specific and detailed to be widely off the mark—so we see no reason not to use the interview data as preliminary evidence for or against the various theories under considerations.

FINDINGS

Our main finding is that most of the professors interviewed described childhood, adolescence, or early adulthood (defined as age 18-25), and not the late 20s or later, as the key periods during which their political views formed. Seventy-one percent of all interviewees—and 81 percent of liberals—fell into this category. Table 1 shows the proportion of respondents in each field who mentioned only childhood, adolescence, or early adulthood as the key periods for the formation of their politics, as well as the proportion of those who mentioned each period specifically (since

we allowed for the possibility that multiple periods would be mentioned, the latter row distributions do not sum to 100). Only in engineering and economics—the fields with the smallest number of liberals—do half or less of respondents not fall into category of relatively early political socialization.

Typical of respondents for whom childhood experiences were important is a 53 year-old biologist who teaches at a 4-year school in the Northeast. When we asked him where he got his politics, he told us that they came “probably from my family.” His father, a clerical worker, had been raised in a liberal household, and then “grew up with certain attitudes that were passed on to me... I remember how appalled my father was in 1968... with the Democratic presidential convention and the actions [taken by the police] in the street. I just remember him muttering, ‘Gestapo, Gestapo’ at the television screen. I... had that background as a child.” Entering college in the early 1970s, this interviewee naturally gravitated toward activism, becoming involved with the “Catholic left.” His politics, he added spontaneously, had therefore taken shape “before I would have really initiated any kind of academic career.”

While only a handful of interviewees cited childhood experiences alone as being formative of their political views, it was common for them to mention some combination of childhood, adolescent, and early adult experiences. For example, a 37 year-old Mexican-American sociologist teaching at a 4-year school said that she came from “a fairly liberal political environment,” from a “bilingual, bicultural household where issues of tolerance and justice were big.” After high school, she spent a year living in Scandinavia, which she describes as “an awakening experience” that led her to think even more seriously about alternative “ways that people [in the U.S.] might practice citizenship” and other roles that “the [American] state might play” in people’s lives.

Those many interviewees who mentioned early adulthood as important to their political development often cited their experiences at college, as in the case of a 50-year old professor of business who told us she'd grown up poor, managed to win an undergraduate scholarship to a private university, and only there realized that "there was such a difference [between] the people who had the means and the wherewithal...to live their life" as they wanted and those like her parents, who didn't. "Debating... big issues" with her classmates and friends, she moved "more and more toward the liberal side," even becoming involved in protests against a conservative university administration. Yet college was not the only kind of early adult experience brought up in the interviews. Beyond travel, some interviewees spoke of pre-collegiate work experiences; others of major political events that had galvanized their thinking when they were young adults; and still others of burgeoning religious commitments or involvement with social movements.

Regardless of the specifics of these stories, the overall temporal pattern in the data is clear: most professors, especially liberal ones, claim that their politics were formed in the main before they became professors. (Only 4 respondents in the early political socialization category completed their terminal degrees and became professors before they were 25.) This finding is consistent with a large body of empirical research on politics and the life course, which shows that for most people political views and identities form and stabilize in late adolescence and young adulthood (Alwin and McCammon 2003; Highton 2009).

Such a finding is in tension with the class politics and professional socialization approaches. If the liberal politics of professors were a direct function of the disjuncture between their high levels of cultural capital and modest levels of economic capital, we would expect most to have fairly typical American political views growing up and in college, and begin veering significantly left only after they were well into their academic careers, at which point it might

become apparent that they were members of a dominated group and that their economic interests favored redistributionism and cultural distancing from the business classes.

Is it possible that professors' liberal politics are still a function of class either in the sense that professors tend to come from New Class families, embracing liberalism as part of their class habitus growing up, or in the sense that liberalism forms part of the academic habitus they begin to take on as they move toward professorial careers, with the political valence of that habitus shaped by the structural position of the professoriate? In our interview sample only 9 of the 32 liberal professors—about 28 percent—had parents whose occupations fell within the broad rubric of the New Class. The rest came from class backgrounds that ran the gamut, from fathers who were truck drivers and gravediggers to those who were businessmen and industrialists. Although class background may have played a role in shaping the politics of some respondents, and undoubtedly influenced other aspects of their lives, including their educational and professional trajectories, aggregate levels of professorial liberalism do not appear to be a straightforward story of class reproduction. This is consistent with the findings from the Fosse and Gross paper. They found that professors are more likely than non-professors to come from families with advanced educational credentials and generally high levels of socioeconomic status, but that neither fact accounts for the professoriate's distinctive politics.

Is professorial liberalism then a story of movement into the academic habitus, of ascent or descent into a particular niche in the class structure where liberalism is part of the style of life? Timing evidence for this would be the same as evidence in favor of the professional socialization thesis: we would expect political views to take shape primarily during graduate school as promising students move toward becoming professors. The narratives of some interviewees certainly fit this profile. A 60-year old economics professor at a doctoral granting university in

the Northeast is a case in point. Although he considers himself a moderate today, his early liberal views, forged in reaction to the opinions of his conservative parents, were, he says, the product of attending “a very leftist graduate school,” where he found it to be “far more exciting to challenge ideas than to just accept a common body of knowledge.” But in total only four interviewees offered narratives that mentioned graduate school.

Could it be that socialization into the academic habitus begins at the undergraduate level? Scholars like Menand (2010) have argued that undergraduate education in the U.S. is structured with the implicit idea of training future Ph.D.s, and if one allows that acquisition of the academic habitus can begin in college, then the numbers in the rightmost column of Table 2 would seem to provide support for this version of the class politics theory of professorial liberalism. The problem with this interpretation of the data, however, is two fold. First, only a third of liberal interviewees mentioned their undergraduate exposure to academic ideas or influential teachers as major influences on their politics. More common was to cite exposure to student peer culture or activist networks on campus, which is consistent with what we know about the mechanisms by which higher education exerts a liberalizing effect on student social and political attitudes (Pascarella and Terenzini 1991, 2005). It is hard to see how liberalization of this kind could be considered an instance of academic habitus transmission. Second, most of those interviewees who did talk about their politics as shaped by interactions with professors did not experience this as a conversion; often those interactions provided them only with new ways to think about previously held value commitments. Promising students may begin to get a sense in college for how to walk the walk and talk the talk of professors, but this process does not appear to be the main source of

their political beliefs.⁵ By the same token, the fact that relatively few interviewees described graduate school as an important period for the formation of their politics suggests that professional socialization theories divested of class politics concerns are also misguided. The small percentage of liberal interviewees who mentioned the late 20s and onward as key to their political development, or who otherwise described significant movement left after becoming professors, suggests that other versions of the professional socialization thesis—specifically, those that point to network-based political amplification effects—may be similarly off the mark, though we cannot assess what seems to us the reasonable hypothesis that network dynamics may prevent professors from experiencing an age-based desistance from youthful liberalism that could be common in other occupations.

As we interpret the data, they are most consistent with the hypothesis that professors tend to be liberal because students who already have liberal views (for whatever reason) are more likely to embark on academic careers, whether because they want to pursue their liberal politics through their scholarship or because, for them more than for young conservatives, becoming a professor simply “feels” like an appropriate career choice given the institutionalized occupational reputation. A 48-year old professor of sociology at a community college in California offered a narrative that seemed to reflect the operation of such a process. Describing his political development, he told us: “I always read a lot of non-fiction. I especially liked reading about U.S. presidents when I was a kid. I liked the whole idea of democracy and equal opportunity. And of course the stuff I read [offered] rather positive images of our founding fathers.... I guess I took that stuff seriously. When I got to college and I started learning the way

⁵ We cannot rule out the possibility that American academia acquired its reputation for liberalism in earlier decades for reasons to do with class politics, and that historical “class effects” show up today in self-selection processes.

things are, I felt betrayed. I felt that the people who were running the country didn't actually believe in the stated purposes of the U.S. Constitution of the government or anything. So I went into sociology.”

To give a greater sense for the degree to which professors' narratives of political becoming stress life events occurring well before they entered the professoriate, and before many of them could be said to have started their academic apprenticeships, we synopsise those narratives in Table 2, focusing exclusively on professors self-identified as liberal (given that our goal is to explain professorial liberalism). In our view, the theory of self-selection based on politics provides a parsimonious interpretation of these qualitative data.

There is an alternative interpretation worth considering: that entry into academe does involve selection on the basis of politics, but not entirely voluntary self-selection. On the one hand, in most disciplinary fields a relatively small percentage of students who start Ph.D. programs complete them (Menand 2010). It could be that conservatives drop out at a higher rate than liberals, accounting for the downstream liberalism of the professoriate, because conservative graduate students feel they don't fit in, or experience overt hostility from peers or professors. On the other hand, it is possible that conservatives are actively discriminated against in graduate school admissions and in terms of hiring and promotion (Rothman, Lichter, and Nevitte 2005). This could occur via direct judgments about their politics, or because in the social sciences and humanities conservative job applicants may be drawn toward what are viewed as politically problematic topics. Either process would leave the same residue of life history narratives as would self-selection.

We do not doubt that processes of this sort occasionally occur, reflecting strategies of political closure. Yet two facts call into question whether they explain the bulk of professorial

liberalism. First, relative to the U.S. population, liberals are vastly overrepresented in the ranks not just of social scientists and humanists, but of physical and biological scientists as well. In the Gross and Simmons (2007) survey, 45.2 percent of respondents in the natural sciences considered themselves liberal, and just 7.8 percent conservative. For most natural science fields—though not all—it is hard to understand how applicants could be judged on the basis of their politics, since their work products are typically devoid of what most people would regard as political content, and since natural scientists report that politics rarely come up informally during job interviews. Some other dynamic must be driving professorial liberalism in these fields and a reasonable assumption is that that process probably explains much of what is happening in the social sciences and humanities as well. Second, Gross and Simmons asked their respondents directly if scholars' views on national politics should be considered when evaluating their suitability for academic employment. Ninety-five percent said they should not. That certainly does not mean there is no discrimination against conservatives in academia, but it raises the question of whether there could realistically be enough to explain the extreme patterns of political lopsidedness one finds there. Our presumption is that self-selection is of greater causal importance.

DISCUSSION

As we have emphasized throughout, our findings must be interpreted cautiously. They are based on retrospective data, speak only indirectly to the various hypotheses under consideration, and do not speak at all to other hypotheses discussed in the Fosse and Gross paper—for example, that professorial liberalism may be a function of typical cognitive styles of those drawn toward academic and scientific careers. Nevertheless, the data provide at least preliminary evidence in

support of the theory of self-selection. The next step for research is to test the theory more systematically. This should involve the use of longitudinal data as well as surveys of college students designed to ascertain not simply if, but why liberals are more inclined than conservatives to aspire toward academic careers. The Fosse and Gross theory emphasizes perceptions of fit with an institutionalized occupational reputation, but sociologists of higher education know almost nothing about the content of that reputation from the point of view of students, and cannot determine at present whether fit is as important as differences in values or life priorities between young liberals and young conservatives in explaining the relative paucity of the latter in the “academic pipeline” (Woessner and Kelly-Woessner 2009).

What, though, are the implications of our research for scholarship on diversity and higher education? Given space constraints we consider only one here. To return to the broad, mechanisms-focused research tradition mentioned at the beginning of the chapter, we see Fosse and Gross’s theory, and our indirect test of it, as helping to highlight the centrality of self-selection in contemporary social life and its consequences for a wide variety of organizational outcomes. We hope that scholars of diversity might be led by our findings—which speak, after all, to patterns of political diversity—to think systematically about the myriad ways in which self-selection may shape inequality in higher education. This is not a new issue. The notion that class reproduction occurs partly via differential educational aspirations—for example, through self-selection into college—is one of the pillars of research in the status attainment tradition (Sewell, Haller, and Portes 1969). More recently, much scholarship on inequality and education has focused on structurally-mediated cultural differences as helping to explain differences in group outcomes, from work on the “oppositional culture” of “involuntary” minority groups (Ogbu 1978; see Carter 2007; Massey, Charles, Lundy, and Fischer 2006) to studies of how

gender stereotypes affect the propensity of women to major in math and science fields (Charles and Bradley 2009)—processes that play themselves out in the choices students make. Yet, save for the approach of Bourdieu and rational choice theory, both of which are problematic in different ways, no encompassing theoretical paradigm has emerged to make sense of all the sociologically significant moments of self-selection (each embedded in specific material contexts) out of which the educational life course is comprised. The development of such a paradigm, along with more explicit attention to self-selection and its cultural underpinnings as concerns the decision to attend college, the application process, the selection of schools, choice of major and the formation of career ambitions, choice of peer groups, study habits, and so on, could go far toward helping sociologists of higher education heed Barbara Reskin’s (2003) call for scholars of inequality to uncover the hidden mechanisms that help perpetuate the current “American stratification system” (Massey 2008).

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Table 1. Timing of Political Formation by Field

Field	Percent of interviewees who say their political views formed prior to age 25		Percent with early formed views mentioning childhood	Percent with early formed views mentioning adolescence	Percent with early formed views mentioning early adulthood (18-25)
Sociology	92.9		53.9	38.5	69.2
Biology	80		50	87.5	87.5
Literature	64.3		33.3	66.7	88.9
Business	88.9		50	50	87.5
Engineering	45.5		100	60	60
Economics	50		50	75	75
Total	71.2		51.1*	66	78.7

*Row total does not add to 100 because of coding for multiple periods

Data: Interviews with 66 American professors, 2006-7.

Table 2. Synopsis of Political Formation Narratives of Self-Identified Liberal Interviewees

Field	Age	Gender	Type of School	Narrative Synopsis
Biology	53	Male	4 year	Got his liberal politics directly from his father, and became involved in activism in the early 70s before he "initiated" his "academic career."
Biology	57	Female	4 year	Went to Bryn Mawr in the late 1960s and became committed to liberalism there.
Biology	62	Male	Doctoral	Parents were committed to the left—"I grew up in a family that read the <i>Manchester Guardian</i> "—and interviewee got involved in SDS and the civil rights movement in college.
Business	50	Female	4 year	Brought up in a lower middle class household. Experienced effects of social and economic inequalities while growing up, and became a committed liberal in college.
Business	57	Female	4 year	Political views and interest in politics developed very early. She was invited to President Johnson's inauguration when she was 14, and in college began working for various civil rights leaders.
Business	58	Female	4 year	Parents were conservative Republicans. Was sent to a special high school for gifted children where students were encouraged to think for themselves. By "late high school" she had come to think of herself as a liberal.
Business	60	Male	Community college	Grew up in a conservative family but moved toward liberalism in college. Became extremely liberal while attending law school in San Francisco, getting involved in the anti-war movement. Entered academia later.
Business	64	Male	Doctoral	Can't remember exactly how his political views formed, but thinks it had something to do with the fact that his parents, through their church, were always concerned to help the poor.
Economics	66	Female	Community college	Grew up poor in a small community where government-provided services and infrastructure were essential. Became committed to the idea of an activist state at relatively early age.
Economics	69	Male	Community college	Grew up in a very conservative family but was converted to liberalism in college in the 1960s.
Engineering	36	Male	4 year	Grew up in a Democratic household and has "always been surrounded with more liberal people than conservative people."
Literature	49	Female	4 year	Brought up by a politically liberal family in a working-class city with a strong tradition of union activism. Developed liberal views in grade school. Participated in anti-war activities in college.
Literature	49	Male	4 year	Raised in a liberal academic family that was actively involved in the civil rights movement and that worshipped in a progressive church.
Literature	52	Female	4 year	Grew up in a conservative Southern Baptist family, but political views began to shift in high school after her brother was nearly drafted to go to Vietnam.
Literature	61	Male	Doctoral	Grew up in a Republican family in Chicago but, at age 18, found himself incensed by what seemed to him the "racist" views of Barry Goldwater. Has been a Democrat ever since.
Sociology	37	Female	Community college	Parents were fiscally conservative and socially moderate. "Absolutely, definitely" became a liberal during college, in part through studying sociology. Became involved in campus activism.
Sociology	37	Female	Community college	Parents were "Rockefeller-type" Republicans. Became liberal in college through work for Planned Parenthood and anti-Gulf War activism. Studying sociology as an undergraduate gave her a way to make sense of injustice.
Sociology	37	Female	4 year	Grew up in a liberal household with open discussions of social issues. Spent a year in Norway after high school, an experience that "awakened" political awareness.
Sociology	42	Male	4 year	Liberal politics developed in college through activism with the Central American solidarity movement, and were further developed through reading critical theory in graduate school.
Sociology	47	Female	4 year	Grew up in housing projects and trailer parks, was aware of class injustice from a young age, and was already a "flaming liberal" by middle school.
Sociology	48	Male	Community college	In college came to think that the people running the country weren't living up to the nation's ideals, and began studying sociology to figure out why.
Sociology	48	Female	Community college	Father was a progressive Jewish doctor and mother was a Baptist minister who worked in Africa. Conversations at the dinner table "fell very much on the liberal side of things," leading her to be committed early on to the cause of social justice.
Sociology	51	Male	Doctoral	Raised in the late 1960s by a single mom who sent interviewee to a Big Brothers' Association camp one summer when he was still a kid. There he was exposed to liberal college students who decisively influenced his politics.
Sociology	53	Male	4 year	Grew up in a working class household but was educated in a wealthy suburban school district because he had scored high on an IQ test. Came to think others should be able to profit from similar opportunities, which requires a strong state.
Sociology	56	Female	Doctoral	Brought up in a very conservative household. Started to develop alternative views as an undergraduate studying to be a teacher, and these were solidified during work overseas after college.
Sociology	75	Male	4 year	Grew up Denmark during the years of Nazi occupation and came to believe in the importance of a strong welfare state. Became a committed Democrat upon his arrival in the U.S. at age 23.