

Cultures of the Academic Humanities

RESIDUAL

Pastoral Effacement

Assumes that professors have a higher calling than their undergraduate peers who go into professions like medicine, law, or business. Teaching is portrayed as being motivated solely by altruism. Raising more worldly concerns is viewed as indecorous and ungrateful, jeopardizing the moral charter to instruct and elevate the young. As with women in the 19th century cult of domesticity, professors are supposed to accept economic subordination in exchange for moral authority. No formal power, but license to hector, attempting to be the conscience for the educated public.

Like estateless second sons who become pastors in British novels, this effacement is associated with downward economic mobility. Or more precisely, claiming a cultural birthright *by* downplaying economic interests. This could be pitched in terms of being well-off enough one didn't need to bother with money (the connoisseur, the gentleman scholar), or as a noble sacrifice for a higher calling (the missionaries of culture).

Pastoral effacement is not at all welcoming to anyone, especially non-WASPs and professors from working class backgrounds, who openly discusses money. As an example, try this experiment:

- 1> Take a criticism of Stanley Fish (or his Porsche)
- 2> Can you easily add "vulgar" or "ostentatious"?
- 3> Can you add "arriviste"? Can you add "Jew"?

This suggests the academy's WASPish roots are especially visible when a non-WASP displays differing attitudes toward self-promotion or the display of wealth.

DOMINANT

Ressentimental Piety

The dominant academic culture has retained a key plank of Pastoral Effacement: *Never express your self-interest directly, but always in the name of something more admirable.*

A corollary is the notion that you can't criticize something from which you benefit (whether you desire those benefits or not). This leads to strained positions and disingenuous behaviors: one downmanship, foregrounding the marginalized aspects of your identity to the exclusion of all others, and rarely discussing ways you implicated in things you would like to change.

Ressentimental piety privileges *identities* over political and economic *circumstances*. This highlights important issues, but often at the cost of eliding others. The "personal is political," but in the university the political often gets reduced to specific persons who are pushed to function as synecdoches for larger issues. People are expected to represent larger issues and populations, but often in ways that obscure the specific forces that impact them on campus. The prevailing ethos is to *act locally by speaking globally*.

These dynamics resemble what Nietzsche identified as "ressentiment," where power is viewed with guilt, suspicion, and an odd self-loathing that—paradoxically—is a marker of the very privilege it seeks to renounce. Advantage is pursued by critiquing others' advantages, not by pursuing one's own. As with pastoral effacement, the pursuit of purity trumps a more forthright discussion of personal interest or collective goals.

EMERGENT

Stars, Workhorses & Proles

Increasingly humanities professors are divided between a few stars with decent salaries and low workloads, tenured professors with large workloads, and adjuncts with little security at all. This arrangement is not uncommon in downsizing industries: celebrity CEOs, mid-level managers expected to increase productivity as there are fewer of them to do the work, and regular workers with less and less job security. A dismal job market makes it harder to complain because workers feel lucky to have a job at all and paranoid about losing the job they have.

The dilemma faced by most professors mirrors that of mid-level managers whose white-collar status is at odds with an economic situation increasingly closer to blue-collar workers. In the case of tenure-line professors, *culturally* they are encouraged to model themselves on academic celebrities, while *economically* their experience is shifting closer to adjuncts, especially in terms of underpayment for their workloads.

Few cultural tools are readily at hand to address these challenges. If you imagine that your best ground for speaking is moral authority uncompromised by economic concerns, it won't do to go grubbing for money. If you're practiced at speaking on behalf of others, it may feel risky and selfish to make demands in your own behalf. If you had to beat out a few hundred people to secure any job at all, it's hard to push for improvements. The cultures of the humanities have yet to catch up with and successfully address the economic circumstances professors now face.