

Academics and Anti-intellectualism: Representations of the U.S. Primetime Professoriate (0061)

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Anti-intellectualism, which refers to the devaluing of intellectual activities (Elias, 2009), is considered a uniquely American concept (Hofstadter, 1963; Wacquant, 1996) dating back to the founding of the United States (U.S.) “when it was important to distinguish ...[its] practices and values from ...[its] European counterparts” (Long, 1996, p. 33). Many scholars link the notion to the U.S. public’s disregard for scholarly endeavors and tenure (e.g., Berrett, 2015; Wacquant, 1996).

This study contends that media fuels anti-intellectualism through its depiction of higher education (HE), which contributes to the public’s pointed criticism of academe. Media theorists contend that the more people watch television, in particular, the more likely they are to integrate those depictions into their world views (Weinmann, 2000). As a result, television plays a key role in affecting and reflecting the public’s attitudes and values (Chory & Carozza, 2008; Mastro & Tukachinsky, 2012; Weimann). The purpose of this study is to explore portrayals of academics in U.S. television series that aired between 1996–2014 (Table 1) to better understand the U.S. publics’ anti-intellectual views and shed light on their attitudes about higher education.

Conceptual Framework and Methodology

Based on Hofstadter’s (1963) work, Rigney (1991) has developed a typology of anti-intellectualism – (a) anti-rationalism, (b) anti-elitism, and (c) unreflective

instrumentalism. He defines *anti-rationalism* as professors being cold, distant, and lacking a moral compass. *Anti-elitism* suggests that academics see themselves as better than the common person and out of touch with reality. Finally, *unreflective instrumentalism* is evident when academics' focus on impractical research topics (Roller, 2012).

The study included 12 series ($n = 93$ episodes) that aired between 1996-2014 and were set on college campuses with academic characters. I analyzed eight episodes of every series (except for *Party of Five*) during the first year the student characters were in college, since it is in the early episodes that series establish the college setting. Themes were developed based on the anti-intellectual framework posited by Rigney (1991).

Findings

This investigation provides some explanation for the public's current anti-intellectual views by exploring representations of anti-rationalism, anti-elitism, and unreflective instrumentalism in the analyzed series.

Anti-Rationalism

Professor Solomon is an alien sent to earth to study human behavior in *Third Rock From the Sun*¹. The fact that he is an alien who takes on the guise of a professor says something about seeing academics as inhuman. In the analyzed episodes, he shows this inhumanity by frequently berating his students and colleagues. His harsh comments

¹ After the first mention, I will use only a portion of the title for brevity (e.g., *Third Rock from the Sun* will be referred to as *Third Rock*). See the table for series dates.

are a key source of the series' humor while supporting the public's negative attitudes regarding intellectuals. In *7th Heaven* and *Greek*, faculty often decry their students' poor class work. In *Community*, *The Education of Max Bickford*, and *Sabrina: The Teenage Witch*, they resort to calling their students derogatory names such as "idiots" and "morons." These examples are representative of many where academics criticize the quality of their students.

Anti-rationalism also implies the negative behaviors of intellectuals go beyond rudeness to suggest a lack of morality. In these series, few professors enjoy the commonly accepted view of what constitutes a happy home life (i.e., happily married with children) (Thornton & Young-DeMarco, 2001). In fact, academics are often portrayed as alcoholics (*Max Bickford*), divorced (*Max Bickford*), single and lonely (e.g., *Third Rock*; *Max Bickford*; *Sabrina*; *Boy Meets World*; *The Parkers*), promiscuous (*Max Bickford*; *Third Rock*; *Felicity*; *Sabrina*; *Boy Meets World*) or violent (*Buffy: The Vampire Slayer*).

Anti-Elitism

There are several mentions of tenure² within the analyzed series, which support the anti-intellectual distrust of it. In *Max Bickford*, the major characters have tenure, which appears to give them leeway to say and do anything. For example, when a student reports to Max, the department chair, that Walter Thornhill, a divorced and alcoholic professor, has been falling asleep or missing class altogether, Max tells her "I heard he

² After a lengthy probational period, U.S. academics earn tenure, which gives them some job security, because they can no longer be fired at will. However, they are still expected to publish research, be excellent teachers, and support their departments and the institution through service.

was a notoriously high grader and that might make up for the lack of instruction.” Thus, in this series, tenure is conflated with a license for bad behavior. Other examples from *Community* and *Third Rock* further support that tenure legitimizes ineptitude rather than warranting respect.

Unreflective Instrumentalism

Prime-time faculty’s dubious scholarship and general disregard for HE are examples of unreflective instrumentalism. In *Max Bickford*, Max talks to a professorial candidate about his first book, *Wheat Into Whisky: Integrating the American West Into the National Economy, 1815-1860* and his new work, *Sorghum, Millet, and Buckwheat: Crop Innovations in the Southwest*. Max sarcastically asks, “Do I sense a fascination with grain?” To which, the researcher responds indignantly, “You know where this country would be without grain?” This interest in what to the untrained ear seems to be trivial reflects the public’s skepticism (and Max’s) toward the academic who pursues topics of “perceived” insignificance.

There are other examples where the entire academic enterprise is viewed in a negative light. For instance, Moesha (*Moesha*) drops out of college to work at a hip-hop magazine. While there, she is surprised when the receptionist, who she finds incompetent, is promoted. Later in the episode, we are told that that receptionist is a Yale graduate, suggesting this is the reason for her promotion. Therefore, the series exposes the fraud of a college education (an Ivy-League one at that), according to anti-intellectual sentiment.

Conclusion

The negative views of the professoriate not only support an anti-intellectual perspective (unreflective instrumentalism) by espousing public doubts about the value of research (and college itself), but also feed into the view that faculty are contemptuous of others (anti-rationalism and anti-elitism). Media theorists would suggest that these series not only affect beliefs but most likely depict values the public is “already predisposed to” (Long, 1996, p. 36), which in this case are related to academics being petty, pompous, and uncaring. Thus, professors in these series serve as the critics of academe as well as the negative representatives of it, which helps explain why anti-intellectualism persists.

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Table 1

List of Series, Dates, Number of Episodes Analyzed, and a Brief Description

| Series Title (Network) | Series Run | Year of Analysis | # of Episodes Analyzed | Format | Series Summary |
|--------------------------------------------|-------------------|-------------------------|-------------------------------|-------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <i>Boy Meets World</i> (ABC) | 1993–2000 | 1998 | 8 | Half-hour Sitcom | Close group of childhood friends attend the private, liberal arts school, Pennbrook University. |
| <i>Buffy The Vampire Slayer</i> (WB) | 1994–2000 | 1999 | 8 | Hour Sci-Fi Romance Adventure | Young woman battles demons while attending the University of California at Sunnydale. |
| <i>Community</i> (NBC) | 2009–2012 | 2009 | 8 | Half-hour Sitcom | A diverse and unlikely group of students at Greendale Community College become friends through their study group. |
| <i>The Education of Max Bickford</i> (CBS) | 2001-2002 | 2001 | 8 | Hour Drama | Tenured professor assumes the role of chair in an American Studies department at an elite women's college in the Northeast. |

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|-----------------------------------------------|-----------|------|---|---------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <i>Felicity</i> (WB) | 1998–2002 | 1998 | 8 | Hour Drama | Young, sheltered California teen follows a high school crush to the University of New York. |
| <i>Greek</i> (ABC Family) | 2007–2011 | 2007 | 8 | Hour Dramedy | A smart young man begins Cyprus-Rhodes University where his sister is the president of her sorority. |
| <i>Moesha</i> (UPN) | 1996–2001 | 1999 | 8 | Half-hour Sitcom | A bright African American teen attends California University. |
| <i>The Parkers</i> (UPN) | 1999–2004 | 1999 | 8 | Half-hour Sitcom | Spin off of <i>Moesha</i> . Mother and daughter begin at a local community college, Santa Monica College. |
| <i>Party of Five</i> (FOX) | 1994–2000 | 1998 | 5 | Hour Drama | Story of orphaned family in San Francisco. One of five children begins Stanford. |
| <i>Sabrina The Teenage Witch</i> (ABC) | 1996–2003 | 2000 | 8 | Half-hour Sitcom | Whimsical story of a young witch learning about her powers from her two aunts as she starts Adams College. |