

THIS WEEK

EDITORIALS

FOOD Chewing on the French distaste for doggy bags **p.8**

WORLD VIEW Post-truth: a guide for the perplexed **p.9**

HEALTH STATUS Social standing influences immune system **p.10**



Break out of the echo chamber

It is crucial to fight discrimination in all its forms, but academia does itself a disservice by excluding conservatives from discourse on societal change.

According to surveys and statistics, most *Nature* readers place themselves on the liberal left of the political spectrum. So two items published in *The New York Times* in the past few weeks will have provoked both consternation and debate. Many of our readers, for example, must have shaken their heads in despair while reading the transcript of an interview with US president-elect Donald Trump last week. The other item, an opinion piece entitled ‘The end of identity liberalism’ probably had many academics simply shaking.

The article by Mark Lilla, a researcher at Columbia University in New York City who specializes in the history of Western intellectual, political and religious thought, called for an end to what he described as an overemphasis by liberals on racial, gender and sexual identity politics. He believes that this focus distracts from core fundamental concepts of democracy and so weakens social cohesion and civic responsibility.

In short, he asserted that many progressives live in bubbles; that they are educationally programmed to be attuned to diversity issues, yet have “shockingly little to say” about political and democratic fundamentals such as class, economics, war and policy issues affecting the common good. Of direct relevance to the US election, he argued that the excessive focus on identity politics by urban and academic elites has left many white, religious and rural groups feeling alienated, threatened and ignored in an unwelcoming environment where the issues that matter to them are given little or no attention.

What is urgently needed, said Lilla, is for US liberalism to refocus on educating all citizens on broader issues that unite people, and on core values of democracy, governance and the major forces shaping international politics — and for the liberal press to educate itself about neglected parts of the country and what matters to people living there.

Lilla argues, perhaps unconvincingly, that fixating on the concerns of particular groups has been divisive, and he calls instead for a focus on unifying issues that affect the majority of people in the United States, with highly charged narrower issues such as sexuality and race tackled with a more-measured sense of scale. But it need not be a trade-off.

The article comes at a time when many in science and academia are rightly worried that Trump’s odious racist, sexist and anti-intellectual remarks during his campaign risk unacceptably broadening the limits of acceptable discourse — and freeing and normalizing people’s worst base instincts and a rhetoric of hate. Not surprisingly, the column has been controversial and has sparked vigorous debate.

But the discussion echoes points made earlier this year by *New York Times* columnist Nicholas Kristof, directed at academics. Kristof, who has long championed diversity issues and so can hardly be accused of conservative bias, argued in a column entitled ‘A confession of liberal intolerance’ that academics are often selectively tolerant, but are intolerant when it comes to considering conservative or religious viewpoints.

Nature has long championed the rights and representation of women and minority groups in science — and will continue to do so. We have also made efforts to reach out and offer a platform to researchers with

diverse political views. We will continue to do that too. And we will engage with and report on efforts by social scientists and others to untangle and properly understand contemporary populist movements. There is already a considerable body of literature on these phenomena and social scientists must weigh in more heavily to inform public debate and vigorously challenge misconceptions — on all sides.

Both articles, although perhaps overstating the case, offer food for thought. They highlight that confirmation bias is rife in all walks of life, including the practice of research and the political viewpoints of academic liberals. No one should kid themselves that they are immune.

Kristof also argued that the low and plunging representation of conservatives and evangelicals on US faculties, and bias against these groups, is itself impoverishing intellectual diversity and discourse. He pointed to an effort to change this state of affairs: the Heterodox Academy, a website set up by centrist social psychologist Jonathan Haidt of New York University to advocate tangible remedies. His column did not go down well with liberals. “You don’t diversify with idiots,” stated one of the most highly recommended comments.

Academics must be vigilant and resist normalization of Trump’s crude vision of society, but must also look in the mirror. A significant chunk of the US population voted for Trump. Are some bigots and racists? Yes; but most aren’t, and progressive academic liberals can’t simply dismiss them as retrograde. More unites Americans than divides them, and building on that common ground is the best antidote to extremism. ■

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Critics’ choice

Post-publication scrutiny of papers is essential for science — but it should be done politely.

To err is human. But to catch that error — does that take a computer? That’s a question that psychologists have been wrestling with in recent months, as automated software has been checking their published findings on a huge scale.

The automated review of basic features of scientific papers marks a new front in the battle for research reproducibility, and one that has split the community. The divide must be bridged before it becomes too wide, and that will require criticism to be both offered and received in the true spirit of academic enquiry.

As we report in a Toolbox on page 151, psychologists discovered starting in August that someone — or something — was commenting