

ACADEMIC GANGS¹

Thomas J. Scheff

Criminologists have proposed that patterns of behavior in youthful gangs can be understood in terms of what they call "the code of the streets," as in Anderson (1994). The code is a set of understandings between gang members which help them meet both their material and emotional needs. In this essay I describe the codes of academe, the understandings between professors in gang-like groups that function to fulfill their needs.

Most academics belong to one or another group called "a school of thought" or a specialty. For example, a large group of academic psychologists consider themselves to be behaviorists. These academics are loyal to the strict code of behaviorism which bands them together in thought, feeling and behavior. In addition to membership in a specialty, all academics are also members of a super-gang or clan, the discipline. The clan of the behaviorist gang is the discipline of psychology. Disciplines are the most powerful units in the university, which is in most ways not a federal system, but a confederation of sovereign disciplines. Although there are academics who belong to no gang, all belong to a clan. Training in all cases and workplace in most takes place in a department, which is always an outpost of a particular discipline.

Since the code of academe is generated by the conditions of modern university life, I believe that it applies equally to all disciplines, the hard, soft, and non-sciences. Even though the physical and biological sciences are rich beyond the wildest dreams of the social sciences and the humanities, their codes and practices are remarkable similar. Somehow in the similarities of departmental existence, and in the interminable committee work that haunts the days and dreams of every professor, the torch of gang and clanship has been passed to most academics, whatever their persuasion.

Just as members of street gangs earn most of their livelihood from theft, academics gain most of theirs from careers. Being a member in good standing of a gang and a supergang is crucially important for advancement of one's career. There is little chance of advancement in the academy without hard work, but flaunting membership in gang and clan can certainly supplement or even substitute for talent and intelligence. Clearly and repeatedly showing one's loyalty to these groups can be most helpful in obtaining research grants and acceptance of publications, twin

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lifebloods of the academic career. Turning out Ph.Ds who are flagrantly loyal to one's gang and clan brings respect, but is not mandatory.

The relationship between gang membership and career is obvious enough for most academics. There are rare exceptions in which career advancement is produced entirely by the originality or importance of one's publications. Of course talent as a teacher is unrelated, or even negatively related to advancement. But in the typical instance, one's writing is judged by a jury of one's peers who are unable or unwilling to recognize originality and importance, especially if it is expressed in a form that is more complex or difficult than their own work. They are taking valuable time out of their busy lives to serve on the jury, and are not liable to spend undue time with difficult cases.

In the typical case, therefore, gang or clan membership gives rise to a short circuit around the laborious method of judging each case on its merit. For advancement and those grants, fellowships and other financially rewarding projects which require testimonials, one develops a reliable string of fellow gang members who will give one's self and one's project their wholehearted endorsement. These endorsements may depend in part on the merit of the case, but the most powerful determinant is most often a sense of loyalty to a fellow gang member.

Gangland endorsements may sometimes be given out of a sense of self-gain; in promoting a fellow gang member, one is also helping one's own cause, a daisy chain. More usually, the endorser sincerely believes that the candidate has the stellar qualities endowed in the letter of recommendation; his or her judgment is more or less obliterated by a fierce sense of loyalty to the code of the gang.

Many grant applications are judged by an anonymous jury of peers, who will not recognize the identity of the candidate. But gang and clan membership plays a role here also. The artful candidate for a grant designs the proposal in a way that unmistakably signals loyalty to a particular gang or clan. If you are a member of the psychoanalytic gang, your proposal cites Freud frequently and fulsomely. This tactic is risk-free if you know that the jury will be all fellow gang-members. But even if not the case, you can hope that most of your peers will yield to the judgments of your fellow gang or clan members who happen to be on the jury, as frequently happens.

The loyalty of academic gang members to each other and to the code of the gang is easily as fierce as that of street gangs. It is fortunate that academic gangs use words and not bullets, or the homicide rate would be at least as high as that of street fighters.

Although the way in which gang membership in the academy functions for material gain is straightforward, the way it brings emotional rewards is less clearly understood. In what way does gangland reliably produce feelings of well-being? To understand this point, it is necessary to realize that we live in a civilization in which it is difficult to obtain secure and rewarding relationships to others, even under the best of conditions. The continuing climb of the divorce rate is one sensitive indication of this fact.

In most of its aspects, the professor's job is an exceedingly lonely one. The bulk of his or her time is spent alone, conducting research or writing. Contact with students and colleagues takes up only a small portion of the daily round, and is usually limited to the business at hand. Meeting graduate students, who get more frequent and personal attention than other students, is also mostly business. Although it sometimes occurs in isolated pockets of friendship, there is little camaraderie in laboratories, libraries and offices. Without the fellowship of gang and clan, most professors would be entirely alienated in their work life.

Professorial work is isolating from fellowship in a way that may be quite unique. The professor's basic task is to discover new and often highly specialized knowledge. Acquiring such knowledge is not only important for careers, but in most cases, becomes the central focus of the professor's work life, and not infrequently, his or her whole life. One's work becomes the key element in one's identity. Acquiring esoteric knowledge is profoundly and perhaps unavoidably isolating, since there is seldom any one to share it with. The more successful the search, the more burdened one is with knowledge that disconnects one from others, virtually all others. One's publications, like the strands of Walt Whitman's noiseless patient spider, sometimes find anchors, but they are few and often far away.

The emotional function of the gang and clan is to remove the crushing burden of isolation created by esoteric knowledge. Especially in the social sciences and humanities, there is seldom a clear sense of real world problems that can serve as a center of communal interest. In essence, academic gangs and clans create an artificial but highly involving round of problems and practices that provide a sense of unity among members. Members can hardly communicate with each other about their individual, specialized interests, but they can work together in harmony with the problems and diversions of their gang and clan. These problems and diversions create a community; without them, stark division and separation.

Given the emotional and material needs of professors, much of what goes on in teaching and research becomes a ritual whose main focus is on maintaining gang and clan identity. Given this mesmerizing focus, gang and discipline rather than real

world issues take pride of place. This idea explains most of the more obvious scandals in the academy, and some that are not so obvious. It completely explains the shocking distance that most professors maintain from their students, especially undergraduates. The center of the lecturer's interest is in problems of his or her specialty and clan, which mean nothing to undergraduates.

One example of the intellectual dominance of the clan is provided by the way in which mathematical models have become the central focus of modern economics, even though they have proven to be useless in dealing with real world problems. The absence of empirically verified economic knowledge has been recently attested by the shockingly bad advice economists gave to Russia and the other countries formed from what was formerly the USSR and its satellites.

Another example is the continued preoccupation of academic psychologists with laboratory experiments using a captive audience of undergraduates as subjects. Although it has long been clear that the kind of knowledge generated by such studies is useless for educators and clinicians or anybody else, there is no sign of abatement.

A final example is the current fad of postmodernism, which has swept over the humanities like a plague. Its originators, authors like Derrida, demonstrated that if you remove a verbal statement from its context, its meaning becomes so ambiguous as to be undecidable. This proposition is true and even important, so long as the clause about context is kept in mind. It reminds us that verbal expressions in all ordinary languages are multi-valued and therefore completely context dependent: only artificial languages like algebra and computer programs are without ambiguity and therefore contextually invariant.

The postmodernists, however, have ignored the qualifying clause, generating a tidal wave of research which assumes that complex verbal statements are undecidable, which is absurd. Although there are frequent misunderstandings in ordinary language discourse because of the ambiguity of its verbal parts, it is also often understood, even if the form of discourse is complex, as in aphorisms, allegories, and jokes. Capable users of language remove ambiguity by relating verbal expressions to their context. Postmodernism is a mountain created without even a molehill. It is a mere conceit, having no basis in reality or scholarly value.

The premises that form the basis of behaviorism, postmodernism and other academic gangs, and the reasons for the stark separation between the disciplines, are usually so transparently trivial or absurd that they suggest a linkage to emotional needs. The more absurd the premise, the clearer that membership is a matter of sheer loyalty, rather than meeting pragmatic or material needs. Gang and clan members are

therefore assured of each other's loyalty regardless of how the perspective promoted by the gang fares in the real world.

The disgrace that has befallen world communism with the dissolution of the USSR and the Eastern Bloc has left the academic gang of Marxists unscathed. Few of them have so much as blinked at the ignominy that has fallen on their perspective. Security for one's attachments is not easy to come by in our age. The divorce rate for professors is highest in their social class. In a world where secure attachments to others are tenuous at best, the gang and clan member's loyalty hovers on being eternal.

The isolation imposed on professors by their search for specialized knowledge may explain why so much of gang and clan identity is negative in character. Physicists like to say that there are only two kinds of chemists: physical chemists and stinking chemists. Professors of the humanities pride themselves that they are not tasteless and insensitive like scientists. The power in the social sciences resides in the quantitative, number-crunching wing; quantitative social scientists take consummate pains to demonstrate that they are not soft like the humanists. Sociologists are not sure of what their subject consists in, but they are quite certain what it is not: psychological. They abide by "structural" (collective) approaches, and dismiss any attempt to include psychological elements as "reductionist." These terms have little real rationale or even meaning; they are no more than emblems of loyalty to the clan.

If group loyalty and attachment is the main emotional satisfaction found in gang membership, then negative identities make sense. For a gang or clan to attempt a positive definition of their identity risks wholesale divisiveness and disunity, because of each professor's quest for specialized knowledge. Bashing, and much worse, ignoring other gangs and clans is a risk-free way of maintaining unitary groups.

In this atmosphere, academic jargon plays a central role in signaling loyalty to the gang or clan. Some terminology is based on thin air, having no empirical foundation whatever. Psychoanalytic concepts like id and superego have never been defined, neither by Freud nor by any of his followers. Their usage as vague and flexible metaphors continues to confuse both writer and reader, but has a life of its own. The system of diagnostic classification created by the American Psychiatric Association has been shown to be arbitrary and without scientific basis, but little complaint has been raised against it by academic psychiatrists. These classifications are elaborate fictions which function almost entirely as testaments to gang and clan loyalty.

The long survival of the Linnaean system of classification in botany is a more subtle example of jargon whose function is mostly a signal of loyalty. This system is entirely descriptive and atheoretical, based only on the outer appearance of plants, rather than a theory uniting form and function. (The periodic table of the elements, since it is based on atomic theory, is a counter-example). For this reason, every major discovery of new species rattles the entire scheme. It has been long noted that traditional reified classifications are unduly attractive to academicians. Perhaps their role as badges of loyalty to the gang and clan explain their durability.

Is there any way out of the morass of gangdom and clandom? The problem is not an easy one, since gang and clan loyalties are so closely tied to members' identities. Perhaps one direction would be to train future professors in a broader way, paralleling contemporary reforms in medical education. Stretching graduate training to include both interdisciplinary and a general education could have a both an emotional and an intellectual benefit. Such a move might allow professors to talk to each other across specialties and disciplines, and even have a word or two for students and the general public. Cross-talk of this kind would lessen the alienation that makes gangs and clans all but irresistible.

Broadening graduate education might also have an intellectual benefit. We are in an era of hyperspecialization, in which professors know more and more about less and less. As most of the important discoveries in our time have shown, hyperspecialization is intellectually as well as emotionally crippling: *The Double Helix* (Watson 1980) should be required reading for all graduate students, not just those in biology. Dispersing academic gangs may be a more difficult problem than dealing with street gangs, because it is hidden, but it can't hurt us to at least discuss it openly.

References

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- Watson, John. 1980. *The Double Helix*. New York: Norton.