

Paul Lazarsfeld and the Limited Effect of McCarthyism on the Academic Mind

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In what was to be his final major survey project, Paul Lazarsfeld focused on the impact of McCarthyism on academic freedom in the United States. The resulting book, Lazarsfeld and Thielens' *The Academic Mind*, demonstrated that McCarthyism had caused widespread apprehension among social scientists at colleges and universities, but, at the same time, the level of apprehension fell short of the expectations of the study's funding agency. This paper will discuss the origins of the study, its main findings, and Lazarsfeld's own reflections on its shortcomings in subsequent publications. The article focuses on the unexpected and somewhat unexplored finding, originally suggested by fellow survey researcher Samuel Stouffer, who himself had been a victim of McCarthyism, that administrators at "better" institutions had helped defend academic freedom to a greater degree. The article concludes with an application of the survey results to the study of the history of the American Association of University Professors during the McCarthy era.

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In the spring of 1955, 155 interviewers from the National Opinion Research Center at the University of Chicago and Elmo Roper and Associates fanned out across the United States to ask 2,451 social scientists at 165 colleges and universities about the impact of McCarthyism on academic freedom. The study focused on social scientists, based on the assumption that they had been more threatened during that time. It was sponsored by the Fund for the Republic, an offshoot of the Ford Foundation chartered to "support activities directed toward the elimination of restrictions on freedom of thought, inquiry and expression in the United States" (Kelly, 1981, p. 55). At a reported cost of \$165,000 (about \$1.6 million in today's dollars), the survey was a singular effort to study the national climate for academic freedom on American college and university campuses that has not been repeated on that scale since.

The Academic Mind, the resulting book by Paul Lazarsfeld and Wagner Thielens (1958), was the last major study directed by Lazarsfeld. It was also one of the last "hand-crafted" (Converse, 1987, p. 382) survey projects conducted before the advent of the computer in survey research, a fact that had implications for the types of analysis available to the researchers.

¹ The views and opinions expressed in this article are not necessarily those of the American Association of University Professors.

Academic Freedom During McCarthyism

The period from 1948 to the mid-1950s—the “difficult years” (Lazarsfeld & Thielens, 1958, p. 35), as *The Academic Mind* called them—was an era of sustained attack on academic freedom in U.S. higher education. Anticommunist hysteria led to legislative investigative hearings, in which faculty members were asked about their political allegiances and those of their friends and colleagues; to mandatory loyalty oaths, imposed by legislatures or governing boards; and to individual denunciations of faculty members over their past associations with the Communist Party, communist front organizations, or other left-liberal causes.

Robert M. Hutchins (1954), president of the Fund for the Republic and former president of the University of Chicago, assessing the damage inflicted by McCarthyism, concluded, “Education is impossible in many parts of the United States today because free inquiry and free discussion are impossible” (p. 205). He added:

The question is not how many teachers have been fired, but how many think they might be, and for what reasons. . . . You don’t have to fire many teachers to intimidate them all. The entire teaching profession of the United States is now intimidated. . . . The spirit of the teaching profession is being crushed, and, with it, our hopes of education. (Hutchins, 1954, p. 205)

One way to illustrate the national climate for academic freedom under McCarthyism is the case of Harvard sociologist Samuel Stouffer, a close collaborator of Lazarsfeld and a fellow founder of survey research in the United States, who came under suspicion during the preparation of an earlier study for the Fund of the Republic on public attitudes toward communism and civil liberties (Stouffer, 1955). Stouffer, known for directing the seminal, four-volume series of studies *The American Soldier* (Stouffer, Suchman, DeVinney, Star, & Williams, 1949), based on research conducted for the federal government during World War II, was “intensely patriotic,” according to his daughter, who reported after his death that “it would be impossible to describe the anguish” (as cited in Toby, 1980, p. 150) he felt when the suspicions grew into a threat to revoke his security clearance to serve as a consultant to the Department of Defense. Stouffer served in an advisory capacity to *The Academic Mind*, and the central concepts explored in Stouffer’s study became an important part of the Lazarsfeld and Thielens analytic machinery. It seems likely that Lazarsfeld was aware of Stouffer’s experience with McCarthyism.

Origins of *The Academic Mind*

Given Hutchins’ assessment, it is unsurprising that the Fund for the Republic sponsored an investigation of academic freedom. The credit for recruiting both Stouffer and Lazarsfeld, however, probably belongs to Elmo Roper, who knew both researchers through his own activities in the burgeoning field of opinion research and who served as chair of the fund committee that made programmatic decisions (Kelly, 1981, p. 21).

The committee that planned *The Academic Mind* consisted of codirectors Lazarsfeld and Louis Harris of Roper’s polling firm, as well as Stouffer; Frank Stanton of CBS, who had a longtime working relationship

with Lazarsfeld; and Lazarsfeld's former wife, Marie Jahoda. Lazarsfeld had initially planned to author the study with Harris, but, as Coleman (1990) noted, "this aborted" because the two were an "unlikely combination" (p. 88). Wagner Thielens, a doctoral student at Columbia's Teachers College, subsequently became Lazarsfeld's coauthor. Thielens (1996) later reported,

I joined Lazarsfeld's staff in the early summer of 1955, planning to interrupt work on my dissertation for three months to help to prepare a preliminary report to Mr. Hutchins. As it turned out, I stayed on for three years. (p. 422)

Lazarsfeld began work on the project while on leave from Columbia University at the Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences. Once the questionnaire was completed and in the field, the interviews themselves elicited strong responses from the sampled professors, some of whom took offense at being interviewed by what were for the most part younger women who were not academics themselves. Faculty members at one institution wrote a letter to Hutchins complaining that the survey had been "ineptly constructed and executed" (Bacon et al., n.d.). In response to the intense criticism, Lazarsfeld retained fellow sociologist David Riesman to conduct a validation study, triangulating the survey results with data obtained from both the interviewees and respondents. Riesman's efforts resulted in a lengthy appendix to *The Academic Mind* in which he concluded that much of the criticism had been unfair. One can therefore read as somewhat tongue in cheek the authors' note in the acknowledgements, thanking the respondents and expressing hope that once they read the report "they will feel their time was not wasted" (Lazarsfeld & Thielens, 1958, p. x).²

Apprehension, Permissiveness, and Institutional Quality

Lazarsfeld and Thielens set out to investigate Hutchins' assessment of the effect of McCarthyism on academic freedom empirically and explicitly framed the study as such. They first developed a measure of apprehension, a scale based on seven questions about "worries" and "cautions," with "caution" questions involving the respondent taking some sort of precautionary action as opposed to merely being "worried." They included such questions as, "Have you ever worried about the possibility that some student might inadvertently pass on a warped version of what you said and lead to false ideas about your political views?" (Lazarsfeld & Thielens, 1958, p. 76) and "Have you toned down anything you have written lately because you were worried that it might cause too much controversy?" (Lazarsfeld & Thielens, 1958, p. 78). On the basis of the questions that make up the scale, they divided the sample into three groups: those who were neither worried nor cautious (about half the sample), those who were worried but not cautious (about a third of the sample), and those who were worried and cautious (about one sixth of the sample). The latter two groups were combined and described as "apprehensive." As Lazarsfeld and Thielens (1958) stressed, "This classification is . . . meant only for comparative purposes," adding,

² Riesman's contribution to the project is of independent historical interest and should be recounted where space permits.

It would be a legitimate problem of empirical inquiry to ask what score people would consider the onset of dangerous or unusual apprehension. Repeated studies permitting comparisons over various historical periods would give a clue, but we have no such material. (p. 85)

The lack of previous studies for comparison was frankly the Achilles' heel of *The Academic Mind*: Two reviews by eminent social scientists, Harvard psychologist Herbert Kelman (1959) and University of Michigan survey researcher Angus Campbell (1959), came to diametrically opposed conclusions on the question of whether Lazarsfeld and Thielens had provided evidence for Hutchins' claims. There is reason to believe that Lazarsfeld regarded the level of apprehension found to be lower than expected.

Rather than treating absolute values of apprehension, Lazarsfeld and Thielens focused on independent variables that correlated with apprehension and narrowed them down to two: permissiveness and institutional quality. They also tracked the number of attacks on institutions and the perceived pressure on administrators.

Permissiveness was measured on a scale based on a cross-tabulation of two sets of questions: Both contained variations of the tolerance questions of Stouffer (1955), such as, "Would you fire a teacher who is an admitted communist?" (p. 258), as well as questions about allowing student groups affiliated with socialist or communist causes on campus. Questions about permissiveness were intended as a stand-in for direct questions about leftist political leanings of faculty members, which the authors felt they could not ask under the circumstances of McCarthyism.

Institutional quality was measured on a scale that included the number of books in the library, the overall budget per student, the percent of faculty with a PhD degree, the proportion of students who went on to receive a graduate fellowship or a PhD degree, and the cost of tuition.

The overall level of permissiveness of social scientists was found to be quite high; for example, while Stouffer had found that 6% of the general population thought that an admitted communist who is a professor should not be dismissed, the corresponding figure among social scientists was 35%. Permissiveness was, moreover, found to increase with institutional quality (Figure 1[b]).³ Lazarsfeld and Thielens (1958) invoked a functionalist explanation for this finding:

A permissive professoriate . . . is needed . . . to help society adjust to novel conditions while discarding outmoded patterns. It is thus the function of the social scientist to be sensitive to innovation, to be permissive in the full sense of our analysis. (p. 151)

The central finding then was that more permissive professors were more apprehensive (Figure 1[c]). Moreover, Lazarsfeld and Thielens found that professors at institutions of higher quality reported that the

³ The charts in Figure 1 were computed from the data file for *The Academic Mind*. The values were rescaled to make them comparable.

administration was under higher pressure (Figure 1[a]). This finding showed that, during McCarthyism, "what was really under attack was the quality of American college education" (Lazarsfeld & Thielens, 1958, p. 166).

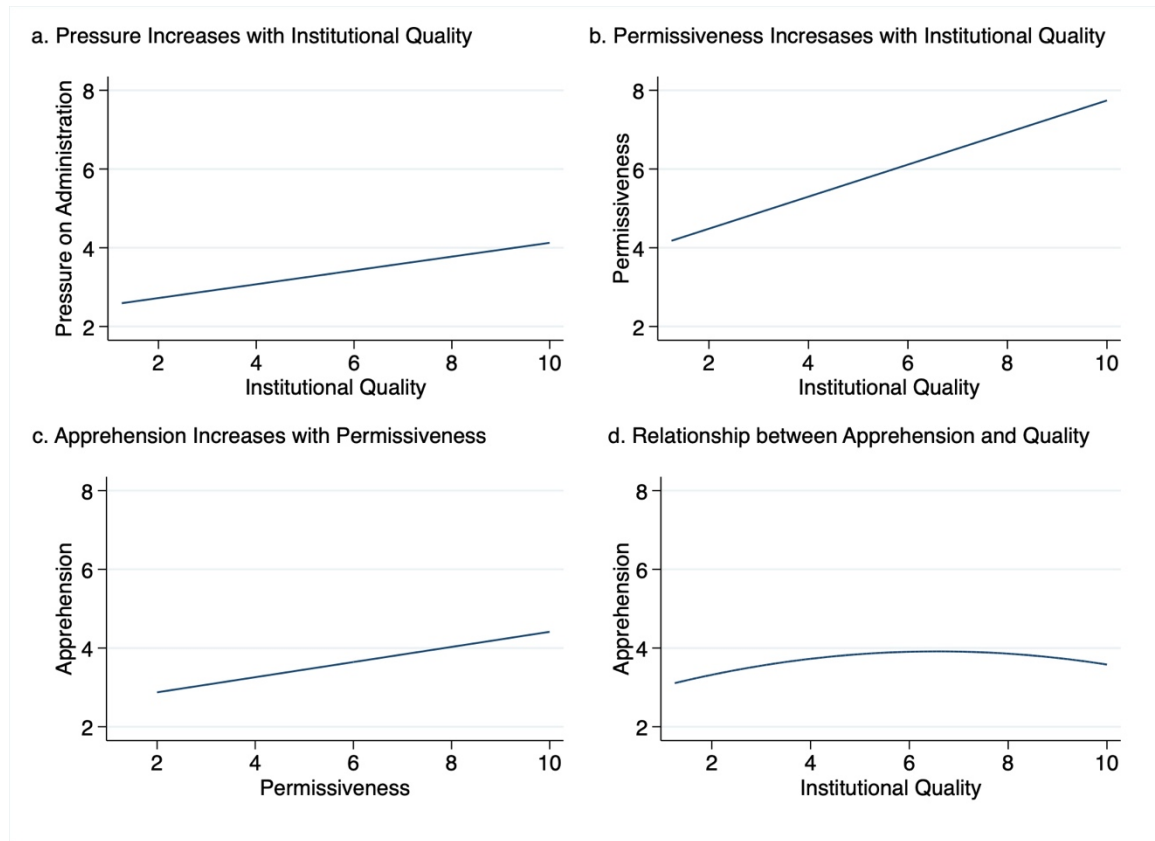


Figure 1. Findings from The Academic Mind.

In an internal memo ("State of the Teachers' Apprehension Manuscript," n.d.), likely written by Lazarsfeld, the following overall assessment was offered:

The main source of the difficult years was that when the community at large is in a conservative mood, then it becomes aware that the college teachers, due to their special function in society, are not likely to share this mood. This would be especially true in situations where public figures want to capitalize on the general conservative mood and try to use the colleges as special targets of attacks. Then the campus faces the conservative mood in its most extreme form and a congeries of events develops which can best be unraveled by starting with the distribution of permissive professors within the variety of educational institutions. (p. 9)

It is an open question to what extent the findings of *The Academic Mind*, such as the relationship between permissiveness and liberal views or between permissiveness and apprehension, could be replicated today. It is important to keep in mind Lazarsfeld's (1956) observation about the "correlation between perception of the Communist danger and permissiveness" (p. 65) that Stouffer (1955) had discovered, about which Lazarsfeld (1956) stated: "Under other circumstances and in other historical situations such a correlation might not exist" (p. 65). Certainly, the predominance of liberal attitudes among professors in the United States is well-studied, but no similar studies about attacks and apprehensions exist.⁴

Administrative Shortcomings

The relationship among apprehension, permissiveness, and institutional quality resulted in something of a puzzle: As noted before and as can be seen from Figure 1(b) and (c), faculty at institutions of higher quality were more permissive, and faculty who were more permissive were more apprehensive. The fitted line for these two relations is linear, yet the relationship between institutional quality and apprehension is not; rather, as can be seen from Figure 1(d), the fitted curve is quadratic: It shows an increase of apprehension as quality increases, but it then falls for the highest quality institutions.

Lazarsfeld and Thielens credited Stouffer—who had been attacked by McCarthyists but not dismissed by the Harvard administration—for a hypothesis to explain this finding: Higher-quality institutions had fewer administrative shortcomings, or, to phrase it positively, administrators more willing to protect academic freedom. However, administrative shortcomings remained somewhat unexplored in the book. Even though the questionnaire asked about the respondents' administrations, *The Academic Mind* does not include a scale of administrative performance in matters of academic freedom, and a chart that summarizes this hypothesis is a schema that includes a purported level of administrative shortcomings, that is, in the absence of actual findings regarding administrative shortcomings, they provided a chart showing what findings of administrative shortcomings would explain their other findings.⁵ Lazarsfeld and Thielens (1958) acknowledged that, even if a larger number of questions could have been asked, "the pooled judgments of professors could not give a really complete picture; for this, interviews with administrators and trustees, investigations of documentary evidence, and so on would be necessary" (p. 169).

In several later publications, Lazarsfeld criticized *The Academic Mind* in a way that suggests a desire to explain the unexpectedly low level of apprehension. For example, Lazarsfeld (1975) declared the findings of low apprehension, seemingly on the basis of the hypothesis about administrative shortcomings, to be somewhat beside the point:

What Hutchins was basically concerned about was the protection of academic freedom. It was almost an accident that he voiced his concern in terms of teachers' apprehension It probably would have been a better translation of Hutchins' concern to concentrate the study on a different subject: i.e., to what extent did administrations protect their faculty members against attacks from the outside? (p. 95)

⁴ See, for example, Ladd and Lipset (1975).

⁵ Figure 7-13 (Lazarsfeld & Thielens, 1958, p. 188).

Lazarsfeld's observation raises questions about the use of survey research for the study of academic freedom. The question of which data would be best suited to assess the climate for academic freedom should perhaps be investigated by comparing results obtained from both faculty and administrative sources.

The Academic Mind and Historical Scholarship on McCarthyism

Lazarsfeld (1956) predicted that "there will one day be a great deal of writing on the atmosphere of freedom in the mid-twentieth century" but that "the historian of the future" studying these phenomena will have the distinct advantage of having "survey data at his disposal" (p. 65). To give a small illustration of the utility of *The Academic Mind* to understand the history of academic freedom, I turn briefly to my own area of research interest: the history of the American Association of University Professors (AAUP). Although the AAUP declared immediately before the onset of McCarthyism that professors should not be dismissed merely because of their membership in the Communist Party, the association did not publish any investigative reports or censure any administrations between 1950 and 1955, when the majority of the dismissals of faculty members for their political views occurred. The way the story is usually told, such as by Metzger (1986), an activist membership was pitted against a timid, sclerotic leadership, the latter including, in particular, the AAUP's general secretary. Only when the membership rose up to replace the leadership, so the story goes, did the AAUP begin to respond publicly to the attacks on academic freedom.

Neither the timidity nor the sclerosis of the AAUP's leadership at the time can be assessed on the basis of the data collected for *The Academic Mind*, but the views of its membership can. The questionnaire asked respondents whether they were members of the AAUP as well as whether they believed that an admitted communist who is a college professor should be dismissed. Half of the respondents in the sample (50.2%) were members of the AAUP. The AAUP members in the sample were evenly divided in supporting and opposing the dismissal of admitted communists (40.0% vs. 40.3%, respectively), with another 19.7% indicating that they were either unable or unwilling to commit. This hardly points to a clear-cut preference among the membership and may help explain the resulting hesitancy on the part of the leadership to act. It certainly complicates the prevailing story.⁶

Conclusion

The Academic Mind provides central historical insights into the nature and impact of the attacks on academic freedom during the McCarthy era, but the book also provides insight into how to study such attacks and their impact now. More than 60 years after its publication, it remains the only source for comparison if such a study were to be conducted today.

⁶ The calculations are based on the data file. It should be noted that the sample is one of social scientists and not one of AAUP members, and thus it may not be representative of AAUP members in general at the time. If anything, however, subsequent studies of the political views of professors have found social scientists to be more liberal than professors of many other disciplines (see, for instance, Ladd & Lipset, 1975). There is, therefore, reason to believe that the views of social scientists who are AAUP members were, if anything, more liberal than AAUP members in general may have been.

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