

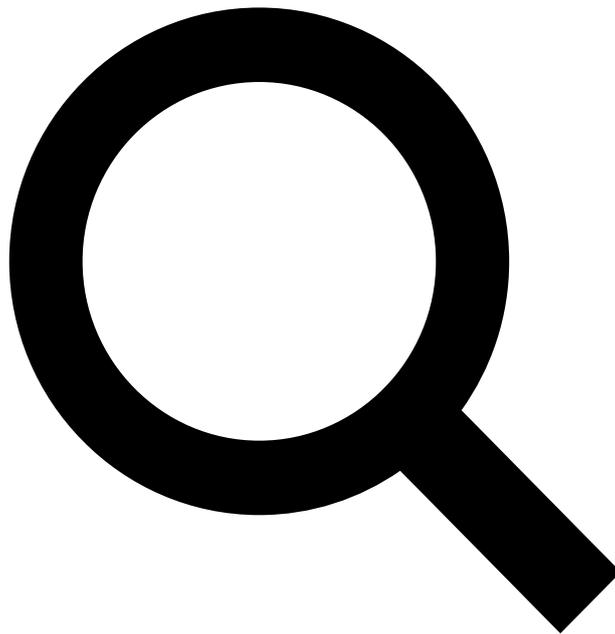
A few weeks ago, Megan McArdle, the business and economics editor for The Atlantic, [wondered](#) why Academia treats its workforce so badly.

Academia has bifurcated into two classes: tenured professors who are decently paid, have lifetime job security, and get to work on whatever strikes their fancy; and adjuncts who are paid at the poverty level and may labor for years in the desperate and often futile hope of landing a tenure track position. And, of course, graduate students, the number of whom may paradoxically increase as the number of tenure track jobs decreases—because someone has to teach all those intro classes.

There seems to be a paradox here:

What puzzles me is how this job market persists, and is even worsening, in one of the most left-wing institutions in the country. (...) Almost every academic I know is committed to a pretty strongly left-wing vision of labor market institutions. Even if it's not their very first concern, one would assume that the collective preference should result in something much more egalitarian. So what's overriding that preference?

McArdle's solution to this paradox is that that Academia's leftward drift (some of it at least) can be explained by the fact that it has one of the most abusive labor markets in the world. I'd rather say that it's probably the other way around and that it is the academics' moral judgements that permitted these inequalities. But in order to see why, we first need to understand why it is that so many academics oppose capitalism.



Why do academics oppose capitalism? Ten years ago, Robert Nozick offered an interesting [answer](#), namely that intellectuals feel that they do not get what they deserve. They should get much more than what a capitalist society offers to its intellectual elite. Nozick wondered...

What factor produced feelings of superior value on the part of intellectuals? I want to focus on one institution in particular: schools. As book knowledge became increasingly important, schooling—the education together in classes of young people in reading and book knowledge—spread. Schools became the major institution outside of the family to shape the attitudes of young people, and almost all those who later became intellectuals went through schools. There they were successful. They were judged against others and deemed superior. They were praised and rewarded, the teacher's favorites. How could they fail to see themselves as superior? Daily, they experienced differences in facility with ideas, in quick-wittedness. The schools told them, and showed them, they were better.

The wider market society, however, taught a different lesson. There the greatest rewards did not go to the verbally brightest. There the intellectual skills were not most highly valued. Schooled in the lesson that they were most valuable, the most deserving of reward, the most entitled to reward, how could the intellectuals, by and large, fail to resent the capitalist society which deprived them of the just deserts to which their superiority "entitled" them?

To go back to McArdle's paradox, the solution to Academia's tolerance of inequalities may lie in the fact that, contrary to what we may think, academics do not oppose inequality. They are meritocratic, just as other people are. If they oppose capitalism, it is just because they do not evaluate their own contribution in the same way as pro-capitalism folks do. During the first 20 or 30 years of their life, they have been told that their contribution (to the classroom) was very valuable, and they think that they deserve a bigger share of the pie than what capitalism offers.

Thus, academics oppose capitalism, but they are not egalitarian. Indeed, according to egalitarianism, à la Rawls, distribution is not based on merit. Everyone deserves an equal share of the benefit of the society and one should depart from equality only if it improves the welfare of the worst-off. Contrary to egalitarianism, academics are perfectly fine with the idea that professors should earn more and that you have to suffer to deserve a tenure position. They are meritocratic and that stance is precisely what makes them oppose market economy. To sum up, one can be leftist and be fine with inequality.

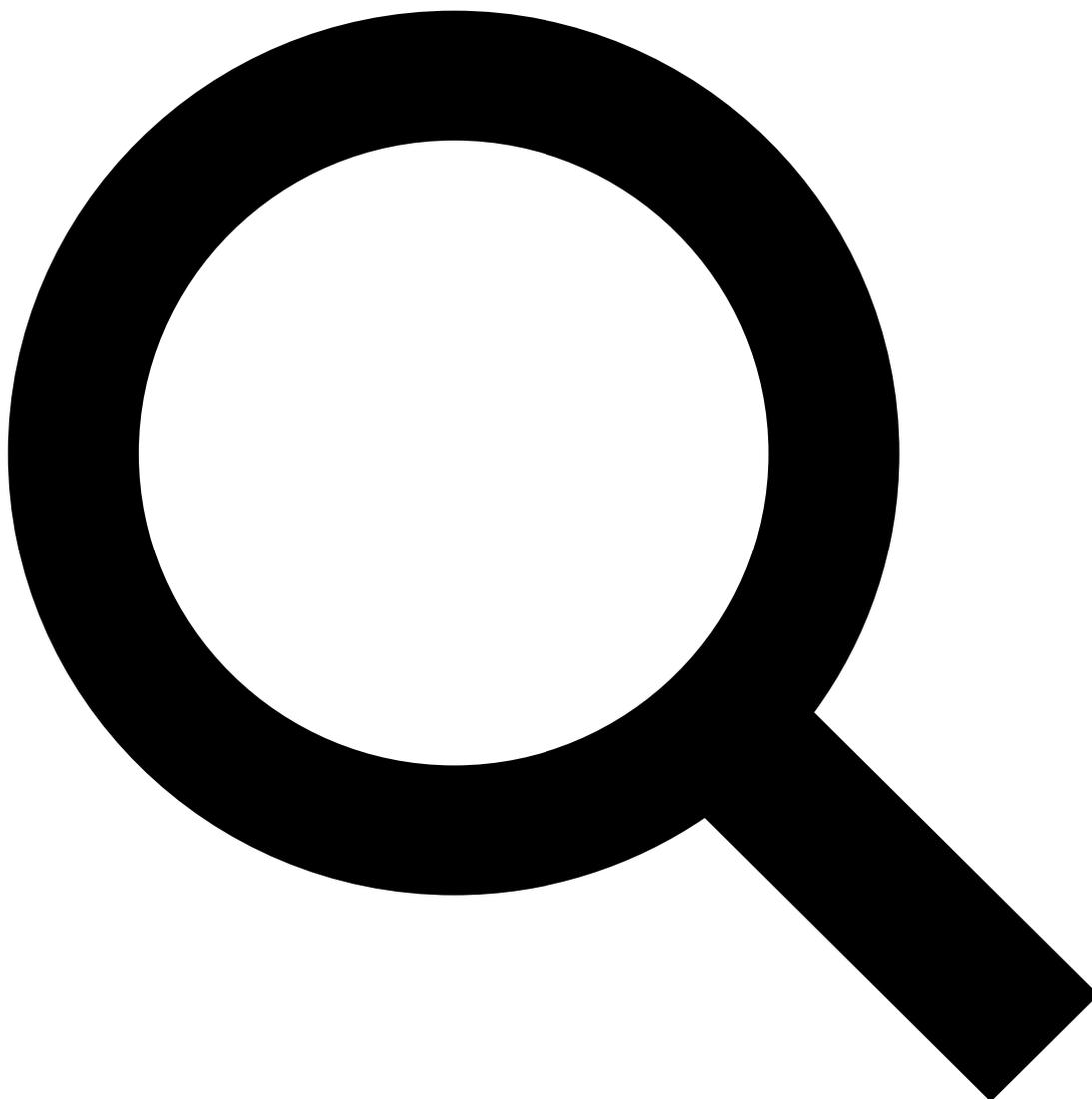
What's interesting with this hypothesis is that it is testable, as Nozick pointed out:

First, one might predict that the more meritocratic a country's school system, the more likely its intellectuals are to be on the left. (Consider France.) Second, those intellectuals who were "late bloomers" in school would not have developed the same sense of entitlement to the very highest rewards; therefore, a lower percentage of the late-bloomer intellectuals will be anti-capitalist than of the early bloomers.

I do not know any study that tests Nozick's first prediction. But [Diego Rios](#) and [Raul Magni-Berton](#) have tested a variant of the second prediction, namely that scholastic performance (independent variable) has an impact on political attitudes vis-a-vis the market (dependent variable). They have surveyed the political opinion of 271 French academics. Not surprisingly, they are much more leftist than the average French and even more leftist than the average French civil servant. More interestingly, they asked them if they were good at school. Strikingly, the better they were at school, the more leftist they ended up being. The data thus seems to confirm Nozick's hypothesis.

To test Nozick's hypothesis from a slightly different angle, Rios and Magni-Berton asked the same academics the following question. Let's say that you have to choose among these five distributions

between academics and football players (other sources of income are kept constant), which one would you prefer? (FF : French Francs 100 000 Francs = 15 000 euros).

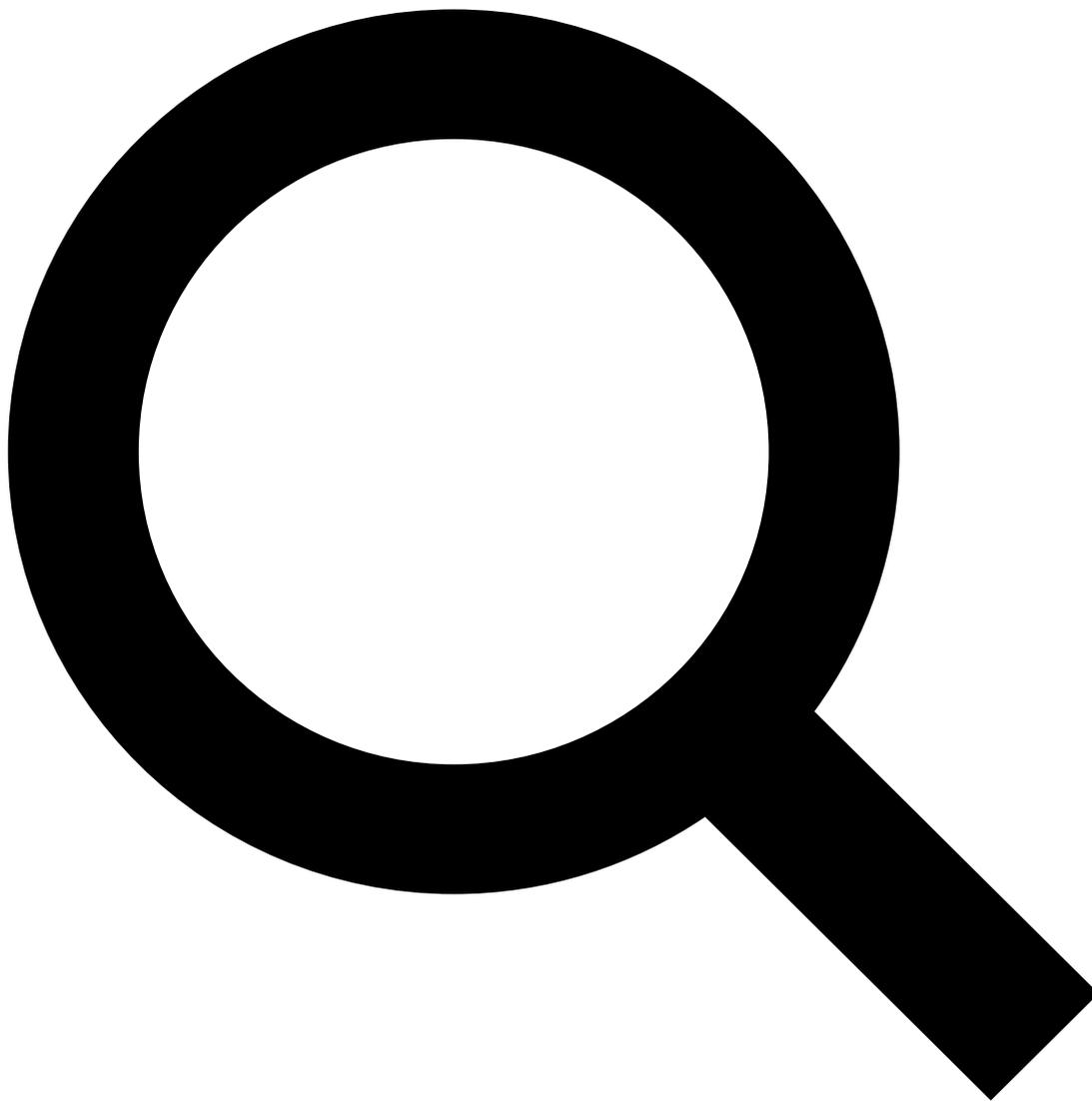


Note that the distribution 2 is the only meritocratic distribution: it gives more to the ones who studied more. Distribution 1 is egalitarian. Distributions 3, 4 and 5 are the distributions that maximise the salary (a Rawlsian egalitarian would pick up one of these since it maximizes the welfare of the worse-off - except, perhaps, if we take envy and other problems linked to inequality into account).

Contrary to what one could expect from some academics discourse, academics are not egalitarian, the relative majority of them choose the distribution 2 - the meritocratic one. More strikingly, the better an academic was as a student, the more she chooses the meritocratic distribution! In further analyses, Rios and Magni-Berton show that the choice of distribution 2 is the best predictor of leftist political opinion.

In the 'Football players vs. academics' question, the amount of education was a proxy for merit. It

was assumed that academic would think that football players do not deserve their salary because they have not studied enough. To control for this hypothesis, Rios and Magni-Berton now opposed academic and engineer - who have studied a lot too. And, in line with Nozick's prediction, very few people now chose distribution 2.



Of course, research is needed but the conclusion is striking (see Rios and Magni-Berton's book [La misère des intellectuels](#)). Intellectuals do not seem to be motivated by egalitarianism (as they obviously say), but by meritocracy. Meritocracy can be strongly inegalitarian. Note that the theory they propose not only explains the attitudes of the intellectuals. It also explains the attitudes of liberal professions, who tend to be favourable to the market. The explanation is that they do not see the discontinuity between markets and schools. Lawyers, doctors, etc, have done good at school, and done good on the market; they inevitably perceive the market as fair - even "meritocratic", because it coincides with the selections operated by the school! In places where lawyers have high rates of unemployment - Spain, for instance - they normally behave as the theory predicts they should do: against the market! And the better they were at school, the more leftwing they became!

I shall conclude with a 'Cognition and Culture' note. Nozick's theory is a very good example of the fact that the same moral principle or the same cognitive mechanism (meritocracy) can lead to very different moral judgements (in favour or against capitalism) depending of the belief one's hold (academics' contribution is great). As I noted in an earlier [post](#), this logic may explain a range of cultural variation in economic games.

Many thanks to Olivier Morin, Paul-Antoine Chevalier and Diego Rios who helped me write this post.