

Call It Sour Grapes

I got my Ph.D. in economics from Princeton in 1997. Twenty-three years after graduation, I remain a professor at a mid-ranked school. The odds that I'll ever get a job at a top-20 department look awfully low. How do I feel about this situation?

The socially approved response, at least within social science, is to feel and express deep admiration for the plainly superior researchers at top schools. I'm supposed to defer to their judgment on not only (a) which research methods are kosher, but also (b) what research topics are worthwhile. If I apply myself, perhaps I can usefully, if humbly, extend their work.

The more common responses of lower-status academics, of course, are jealousy and laziness. Jealousy, because faculty at higher-ranked schools so out-shine the rest of us. Laziness, because deep-down faculty at lower-ranked schools know they lack the skills to do real research. Most aren't even good enough to usefully, if humbly, extend the work of their betters.

Call it sour grapes, but I don't respond to my situation in any of these ways. With rare exceptions, I don't admire researchers at top schools – or try to humbly build on their work. At the same time, I'm not lazy. And in all sincerity, I am not jealous.

Why not? To be blunt, I deny the value of almost all of the social science research going on at top schools. My reaction to 95% of the articles published in top economics journals isn't so much "That's wrong!" as "So what?" I recognize that getting accepted by these journals requires enormous intelligence, training, and effort. Unless you believe in the Labor Theory of Value, however, the *cost* of creating top publications implies nothing about the *value* of creating top publications. And in my considered judgment, the value of top publications is low. When I was in grad school, economists won big for pure – and utterly irrelevant – mathematical theory. These days, economists win big for running bullet-proof randomized controlled trials on trivial topics. Yes, there are exceptions. Phil Tetlock, Ed Glaeser, Lant Pritchett, and Richard Thaler leap to mind. Yet the rule remains: The intellectual value of top publications is low.

Does anything better exist? Definitely. What is it? The kind of research I do, of course. Plenty of scholars do what I consider "my kind of work," but let's focus on me. False modesty aside, I judge *my* work better than most of the work done by researchers at top schools. Indeed, I judge my work to be *vastly* superior. That's why I do it.

How so? At minimum, books like *The Myth of the Rational Voter* and *The Case Against Education* attempt to answer social questions of great significance. Why do democracies

choose bad policies? Why is there a gulf between learning and earning? I say struggling with a great question is better than definitely answering a trivial one. And since I predictably think my books actually deliver high-quality answers to these great questions, my sense of self-satisfaction with my intellectual output is through the roof.

In fact, I'd go further. Call me a megalomaniac, but in my heart of hearts I deem dozens of my *blog posts* to be more valuable intellectual contributions than the typical article published in top social science journals. Consider my "The Public Goods Model vs. Social Desirability Bias." This wee article shows that the so-called tell-tale signs of public goods – people collectively voting for goods they don't individually purchase – could just as easily reflect Social Desirability Bias. A simple point? Yes. But I don't think I've ever heard another economist clearly acknowledge this observational equivalence. So what? This simple point calls into question the efficiency of many *trillions* of dollars of government spending all around the world. Few economists at top schools have written anything to rival this solitary blog post.

You could retort, "OK, then why aren't you seething with jealousy?" Simple: I'm not jealous of researchers at top schools because I would *hate* to trade places with most of them. I would rather do what I do at George Mason than do what Harvard researchers do at Harvard. Indeed, it's not even close. Yes, I would prefer a world where Harvard placed supreme value on my kind of work. After all, I am a chronic daydreamer. Yet long ago, I hedonically adapted to society's wretched priorities. Instead of feeling mad at the world, I rejoice that I get paid to do the work that means the world to me.

P.S. If you have tenure at a top school, none of my negativity should depress you. Today is the first day of the rest of your career. Why not chuck conventional standards and start doing research that really matters to you and the world? If you want to chat about how to get started, just email me.