Fruit Salad All the Way Down: Response to Kaufman on Industrial Relations

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LINK TO ABSTRACT

In my article "The Left Orientation of Industrial Relations" (Langbert 2016), I document the left orientation of industrial relations (IR). I wrote the article in the hope of making people aware of the ideological orientation of the IR community. I want to make taxpayers, citizens, students, parents, and others aware, but more particularly I want to make researchers in IR self-aware. As I noted, my personal experience has been one of participant and observer. As a researcher and teacher, I know what it is like to try to get on in a field when one is out of step. My judgment—may I call it my *scientific* judgment?—is that society would be better off with dramatically less government involvement in labor relations, including fewer privileges for unions. Like Adam Smith, I favor a presumption in favor of freedom of association in labor relations. Smith believed that by and large the best practical remedy for corrupt or abusive business practices is natural liberty. A comparison of countries that take Smith's advice with those that do not favors those that do.

Bruce Kaufman (2016) has written a good-natured, playful riff on my article. I think that Kaufman raises good points about problems in conceptualizing ideological space—an issue I will return to. But the main thrust of Kaufman's piece is to elaborate an approach—actually represented by an equation—for exploring what he calls the "Truth Gap" in academic research:

> The dependent variable, Truth Gap, is measured across i professors working in j social science/humanities fields and disciplines. It represents the deviation,

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right toward excessive individualism and left toward excessive collectivism, between what they publish in research journals and teach to students and what represents value-free, objective truth on the subject. The notion of objective truth corresponds to Milton Friedman's (1953) conception of positive economics; that is, a value-free representation of the actual process in the economy generating the data. It also seems to correspond to Langbert's goal of getting ideology (or just left-wing ideology?) out of academic research so it is no longer defective and wrongheaded. (Kaufman 2016, 207)

By specifying an equation for the "Truth Gap," separated out as a variable that is dependent on certain independent variables including "ideology," Kaufman proposes to overcome what he regards as a defect in my article, namely the mixing of "positive apples and normative oranges" (2016, 204). Kaufman articulates for the reader what she should take to be the intended logic of my article, writing: "A schematic representation is (1) more left ideology → (2) more defective, wrongheaded thinking → (3) more support for unions and regulation" (ibid., 203).

To my mind, Kaufman's reaction to my article exemplifies the pattern that had moved me to write it. In my article, I openly express my point of view: Judgments such as support for minimum wages, union privileges, and other interventions represent an ideology. As well, opposition to such judgments represents an ideology. It is naive to think that scholarly formulations and arguments are separable from moral and ethical outlooks. Unlike Kaufman, I do not pretend to separate "positive apples and normative oranges." Rather, all social science combines positive and normative elements. If one were to ask Kaufman to tell us where to find the "positive apples," he would probably point to the research findings of leading IR journals!

I think that judgments are part of scholarship. Aspiration of value-free scholarship generally goes with a self-awareness deficiency. Because of the value-laden nature of social science, competition and debate are essential. Kaufman represents me as seeking "value-free" research, but I am comfortable with admitting values within scholarly judgments about advancing social betterment. It is apples and oranges together—fruit salad—all the way down.

Kaufman's thinking is revealed in his comments on my scoring of articles for their posture toward regulation and unions. In my article I explain that I examine the "sentiment, argument, or evidence" (Langbert 2016, 63). Kaufman comments: "Evidence is fact-based information and knowledge; it is a positive, value-free input that goes into creating an ideology. By mixing positive and normative within ideology, Langbert introduces serious conceptual and empirical problems" (2016, 204). Nevertheless, it is naive to think that evidence is somehow divorced from value judgments. It is naive to think that journals do not tend to favor the publication of findings or of theoretical models that support the editors' perspectives.

Within the groupthink hypothesis that I examine in my article, the editor's decision of whether to publish typifies the key nodes of the groupthink problem.

Kaufman comments at length on external funding of academic research. In my article, after I had elaborated on the groupthink hazard in the *academic* market, I offered a short section, in which I wrote:

> If governments, lawyers, unions, or businesses sponsor research or create markets for research outputs, then that will tend to prosper academics who fit their interests, and it may lead some others to conform to those interests. If these interests tend to favor government intervention, then a market-based explanation of left orientation will reinforce the groupthink-based and historical explanations. (Langbert 2016, 53)

I regret how those words suggest that the "market-based explanation" stands apart from the groupthink-based and historical explanations. The latter two are interpretations of the faculty labor market, so they too are market-linked explanations. The point of my short section was simply to ask after the funding that flows into IR programs.

Kaufman riffs on my remarks, explaining that funding for IR programs has been declining. He writes: "Without IR, where will students learn about the positive side of unions, market regulation, and the social interest in protecting and advancing the conditions of labor?" At the close of his piece, Kaufman writes:

> Thus, while Langbert looks at the IR field and sees an overwhelmingly left-dominated gestalt, the gestalt I see is a field increasingly tipped to the free-market/union-free right with the flamingoes in danger of sliding off the edge to extinction, at least in individualist America if not social democratic Europe. (Kaufman 2016, 220)

Yes, funding for traditional IR programs may be waning, and, yes, classical liberal and conservative sources give perhaps a few tens of millions of dollars per year to university-based programs. But the Council for Aid to Education (2016) reports that in 2015 there were $40.3 billion in donations to colleges, and about 29 percent went to the top 20 universities—schools that are among the most left wing. A bit of math: the $92-odd million in donations by Charles and David Koch *over eleven years* that Kaufman cites is 0.8 percent of $11.7 billion, which is the amount that *just in 2015* went to top-20 universities, including Cornell, MIT, and Berkeley, key centers of industrial relations research and among the most ideologically left universities. An interesting question is why the left persistently harps on "Koch money" when it is a minuscule drop in a bucket mostly poured to nourish the aims of left-oriented academics at elite universities.

Moreover, the U.S. Department of Education reports that in the 2012–2013 academic year higher education paid about $135 billion in the employment of faculty (Kena et al. 2015, 222). Extended over 11 years that would be $1.485 trillion. That is the market for faculty. To suggest that $92 million from non-left sources will undo the left orientation of the academy, or even break its stride, is misguided. (Another bit of math: $92 million is 0.006 percent of $1.485 trillion.) It is well established that the elite segment of the economics profession preponderantly votes Democratic, and most of the rest of the academy, especially among the top universities that are heavily represented in LERA, even more so. In some schools, especially the most elite schools, which receive the most generous private funding, there is scarcely a Republican voice to be heard. I find it remarkable that Kaufman suggests that students will stop hearing about "the positive side of unions, market regulation, and the social interest in protecting and advancing the conditions of labor" (2016, 220).

Finally, Kaufman presses the point that on labor policy issues the professoriate or the IR researchers in particular may not be much different than the median voter, as represented by Gallup and other polls. By what standard, then, is the professoriate tilted to the left? Here, let me first say that polls are sensitive to wording. Consider these two questions from a Gallup poll in 1996 (see Caplan 2005):

> *Question 24:* Do you favor or oppose raising the minimum wage from four dollars and 25 cents an hour to five dollars and 15 cents an hour?
> *Question 24 Alternate:* Would you favor or oppose raising the minimum wage if it resulted in fewer jobs available to low paid workers in this country?

|	Favor	Oppose	Don't Know
Q24	80.60%	17.39%	2.00%
Q24alt	40.41%	57.03%	2.56%

The variation of wording in the alternate question caused support to drop by half and opposition to triple.

Second, and more importantly, I come back to the main flaw in Kaufman's reading of my piece. I document the left orientation of IR, and by 'left,' I do not mean some skewed measure from some objective neutrality. By 'left' I mean what that word has generally signified in America since the 1930s. I mean left tendencies in politics, which since the 1930s have been somewhat more consistently represented by the Democratic Party than the Republican Party. If the median voter or the median economist also seems to lean left, that doesn't affect my description of IR. I admit that the term *left* has a misleading one-dimensional spatial connotation, but conventional political language does not leave us with very good options.

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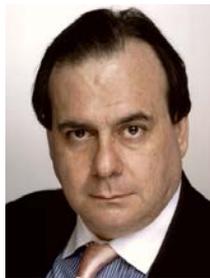
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