

Crimson Recriminations

Larry Summers vs. The Harvard Feminists

Harvard University president Lawrence Summers began his now-infamous talk at the National Bureau of Economic Research blandly enough. “I am speaking unofficially and not using this as an occasion to lay out the many things we’re doing at Harvard to promote the crucial objective of diversity.” But Summers then proceeded to discuss some of the possible differences between the sexes—both natural and social—and so began the latest academic tempest in a crimson teapot. Summers’s remarks are worth quoting at some length. As a possible

explanation for why more men than women reach the top of certain professions, he said the following: “It is a fact about our society that [there] is a level of commitment that a much higher fraction of married men have been historically prepared to make than ... married women. That’s not a judgment about how it should be, not a judgment about what they should expect. But it seems to me that it is very hard to look at the data and escape the conclusion that that expectation is meeting with the choices that people make and is contributing substantially to the outcomes that we observe.”

On the specific question of why there are not as many women at the very top of certain fields of science and engineering, Summers said this: “So my best guess, to provoke you, of what’s behind all of this is that the largest phenomenon, by far, is the general clash between people’s legitimate family desires and employers’ current desire for high power and high intensity, that in the special case of science and engineering, there are issues of intrinsic aptitude, and particularly of the variability of aptitude, and that those considerations are reinforced by what are in fact lesser factors involving socialization and continuing discrimination.”

Throughout his talk, Summers took care to offer various disclaimers: “I would like nothing better than to be proved wrong, because I would like nothing better than for these problems to be addressable simply by everybody

understanding what they are, and working very hard to address them.” He also reminded his audience that his intention was to stimulate discussion by making some broad and controversial claims about differences between men and women, which was, after all, the subject of the conference.

Although the study of sex differences is a controversial area of research, nothing Summers said was outrageously off the mark given the findings of many economists, sociologists, neurologists, and psychiatrists about the innate differences between men and women. In economics, Claudia Goldin and many others have studied women’s choices about hours of work and willingness to travel and work overtime, and this research has shown how important these choices are in determining their future salaries and promotions. Other researchers in recent years have identified so-called “leaking pipelines” for women in many professions—high-achieving women who scale back on their work to care for aging parents or young children.

As for sex differences in mathematics, researchers agree that there is a stubborn but persistent trend: Men tend to cluster at the very highest and the very lowest points on the bell curve of mathematical ability, while women skew more towards the center. So while the people who perform most brilliantly in math are more likely to be men, so, too, are the most deficient. Even within science, women continue to choose different specialties than men do: “46 percent of biologists and

30 percent of environmental scientists are women,” Robert Samuelson noted in the *Washington Post*. “Over time, tastes may change, but the idea that men and women should be equally represented in all occupations is unrealistic and undesirable. Choices differ because men and women differ.”

Despite the fact that such sex differences have been discussed for decades by researchers (and recently given excellent book-length treatment by University of Virginia professor Stephen Rhoads in *Taking Sex Differences Seriously*), M.I.T. professor Nancy Hopkins, who received an avalanche of publicity a few years ago for her self-proclaimed crusade against “unconscious” gender bias at her own university, had an attack of the vapors upon hearing Summers’s speech: “I felt I was going to be sick,” she told the *Washington Post*. “My heart was pounding and my breath was shallow. I was extremely upset.” Of course, poor Ms. Hopkins was able to recover herself quickly enough to speed-dial at least half a dozen reporters and comment on the record about Summers’s remarks for the next day’s papers.

The tempest that followed grew largely for two reasons: First, as head of one of the nation’s most elite institutions of higher learning, and a man with an often abrasive style of debate, Summers is a delicious target. Second, academia is still shot through with faculty members who embrace a radical feminist ideology that not only refuses to accept the findings of science about sex differences, but also demands on a

platter the head of any prominent academic figure who dares to suggest that these differences might partially explain different outcomes between men and women. It is the second of these reasons that explains why Summers has had to issue a surfeit of apologies, endure the haranguing of Harvard professors at several specially-convened faculty meetings, and otherwise adopt the penitent role of the public figure humbled by the enormity of his error. The irony of elite feminists calling for a colleague to be silenced—feminists who so often claim unfair silencing at the hands of a patriarchal establishment—is rich indeed.

It is perhaps fitting to give the last word on the Summers imbroglio to Harvard professor Harvey Mansfield, who wrote the following in the *Weekly Standard* about the recent faculty meetings/therapy sessions/public lynchings where Summers was so vigorously attacked: “The issue of Summers’s supposedly intimidating style of governance is really the issue of the political correctness by which Summers has been intimidated. Political correctness is the leading form of intimidation in all of American education today, and this incident at Harvard is a pure case of it. The phrase has been around since the 1980s, and the media have become bored with it. But the fact of political correctness is before us in the refusal of feminist women professors even to consider the possibility that women might be at any natural disadvantage in mathematics as compared with men. No, more than that: They refuse to

allow that possibility to be entertained even in a private meeting. And still more: They are not ashamed to be seen as suppressing any inquiry into such a possibility." Here, then, is the feminist

problem, nameless no longer: the reign of illiberalism, the triumph of emotion over science, and the appeal of ideological simplicity over the complex realities of human nature.