

# The Erasure of Empowered Gossip in Academia

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Number 7, 2014

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URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1089209ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.21083/nrsc.v0i7.3038>

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Publisher(s)

University of Guelph, School of Languages and Literatures

ISSN

2292-2261 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this article

Adkins, K. (2014). The Erasure of Empowered Gossip in Academia. *Nouvelle Revue Synergies Canada*, (7), 1–10. <https://doi.org/10.21083/nrsc.v0i7.3038>

Article abstract

This article analyzes two recent instances of academic gossip becoming publicized, and suggests that the varying results of these case studies (so similar in other respects) reflects the fragile nature and tenuous status of institutional gossip. It is both a crucial tool for individuals to understand and function within workplaces, but its very effectiveness in popularizing critique makes it easy for those with status to critique it.

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## The Erasure of Empowered Gossip in Academia

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Gossip is both appealing and dangerous. It is appealing because (aside from its intrinsic pleasures) it is helpful making sense of things that are as yet unknown, or whose truth value is still up for grabs. Gossip, by virtue of its looseness, can connect seemingly disconnected dots, provide context, room for evaluation or even speculation. These moves can often help us make sense of what seems inexplicable. And yet, this very looseness and playfulness of gossip is exactly what can also make gossip dangerous - it can be both epistemically unjust (fixing a falsehood as established, following Miranda Fricker's analysis, 2007) or morally harmful (damaging someone or something's reputation). Needless to say, this danger is only enhanced when we look at Internet gossip, because of its permanence (as Daniel Solove, 2008 : notes). Gossip gets spread because it has truth value that comes through indirectly (loosely, through metaphor or synecdoche; or as singular anecdote that resonates with a broader experience of a group). The salient features of gossip as both methodologically loose and purposive are what make it so rhetorically and politically subversive.

My subject in this analysis is institutional gossip, which may at first seem like a contradiction in terms. Conventional definitions of gossip focus on personal, often salacious or malicious narratives; and indeed, scholarly analyses of gossip focus exclusively on personal gossip (Westacott, 2012; Bok, 1983). And yet, we can find many examples of gossip and rumour occurring in or about institutions. Historically, gossip and rumor are deployed in subaltern political communities: pre-French Revolutionary *libelles* and *chroniques scandaleuses* fomented political discontent through their acerbic accounts of royals' hypocritical practices; subcontinental Indians challenged British colonialist practices and plotted rebellion by gossip and rumour; dispossessed African-American communities used rumour as a narrative to produce boycotts of companies with racist business practices (Darton, 1996; Guha, 1986; Turner, 1993, respectively). Contemporary research on institutional gossip is located primarily in the fields of business and public relations, and focuses on gossip as a problem for managers to solve (in achieving or maintaining personal or company reputation), as opposed to an epistemic mode - a way of figuring something out (Baker & Jones, 1996; Kimmel & Audrain-Pontevia, 2010). The common theme in all of these examples is that of people with less access to official channels and authoritative views using gossip as a way of countering and challenging dominant views and practices.

Gossip scholars have long noted its liminal status: whether in literature or politics, it is a crucial device, but one that is simultaneously denied legitimacy, even by those who practice it. Miranda Fricker's arguments about epistemic injustice (2007) provide an anchoring concept - our ability to lend, or detract, credibility from a speaker (often for reasons which have nothing to do with the substance of their claims) limits our access to knowledge; we shift the epistemic goalposts. Calling some claims gossip immediately diminishes the credibility of the claim and the speaker; by contrast, gossipy claims done by the empowered get no critique. Two recent case studies of institutional gossip demonstrate this liminal status: subversive gossip is all too visible and fragile because of its position (done by those on the margins). By contrast, the surveilling, conservative gossip produced by those in power is rarely even recognized as such (because they are merely repeating what "everyone" already thinks). This gives the empowered a double advantage - they have an additional rhetorical tool to deploy that is frequently challenged when those on the margins, who most need weapons, use it.

Chronologically, the first case is the "Perestroika" conflict in the American Political Science Association; and the second (and ongoing) case is the conflict around the *Pluralist Guide to Philosophy* and the Philosophers' Gourmet Report (two competing rankings of graduate programs in philosophy). Both conflicts have the same root issue, which is both methodological and demographic. In both political science and philosophy, certain ways of practicing the discipline were historically dominant (in political science, quantitative analysis, behavioral analysis, formal modeling; in philosophy, analytic metaphysics and epistemology). Alternative methods and areas within the discipline (in political

science, political theory, postmodern and poststructural analysis; in philosophy, feminist theory, and Continental philosophy) exist, but didn't get scholarly attention (articles from these methods and areas weren't present in top journals). Both disciplines also have longstanding issues with internal racism and sexism.

Both disciplines also have longstanding issues with internal racism and sexism (white males are overrepresented at the tenure-track level in both disciplines, despite graduate student populations being more diverse. The American Philosophical Association (APA) responded to mass and public criticisms of its sexism by starting its Committee on the Status of Women in 1969 [sic]. And yet, in 2009, shortly before the *Pluralist's Guide* conflict, women held a mere 17% of tenure-track jobs in philosophy (NCES, 2009). In 2001, when Perestroika began, women were merely 24% of APSA members; currently, people of colour make up only 20% of APSA membership (Sedwoski and Brintnall, 2007; "APSA Election, Membership, And Governance Data" I.A.6, respectively). There were persistent allegations in both fields that a relationship of overlap but not identity existed between the methodological and demographic issues. There were also structural factors that perpetuated hegemony: each discipline also had election structures for the professional associations that actually eliminated the possibility of competition between slates, and hence competing methodologies (Posusney, 2005; Wilshire, 2002).

In both cases, similar questions originally and long raised by disciplinary gossip became public fodder. Both case studies feature explicit linking of demographic problems in the disciplines (who does philosophy and political science - heterosexual Caucasian men) to methodological questions in the discipline (what the disciplines study - narrowly focused and technical questions of interest only to fellow specialists).<sup>1</sup> However, the crucial distinction in these case studies is that in one instance (Perestroika) the gossip contributed to institutional change; whereas in the second case, the *Pluralist Guide*, the institutional gossip appears to be retarding change. I'm going to suggest that a principal difference in the second case is the omnipresence of the official, legitimized gossip (endless blog discussions of the case), which ossified a particular narrative.

This discussion uses the term gossip in a broader fashion than we find in much academic analysis. Gossip is often defined in a front-loading fashion, as trivial, about personal lives only, idle, malicious, or judgmental (Ben-Ze'ev, 1994). It follows a more basic definition of gossip as intimate, evaluative talk about someone who's absent - a definition that fits the word's origins in intimacy ("god sibbe" or god sibling). The intimate, casual nature of gossip is crucial to its being spread. Gossip relies on trust - a story told to a trusted ear. Rumor requires less trust; confidentiality is neither asked nor expected when spreading a rumor, and recipients are more anonymous.

## The Gossip

In both the Perestroika and *Pluralist's Guide* case, gossip about the professions and their problems is longstanding. The opening salvo of the Perestroika debate was an anonymous email sent in October 2000 that used the language and tone of gossip to excoriate the structure and methodological monism of APSA and its lead journals (Monroe, 2005 : 9). This email has the conversational tone and implied intimacy of gossip; well-known political scientists are taunted by nickname (famed political scientist Sidney Verba is "Vee"). There are repeated references to the "coterie" that rules APSA, and the "East Coast Brahmins" - there's no need to name names, because anyone who reads this email should know who's being implicated. (This is the political science version of a 'blind items' column, and exactly comparable to Gluckman's analysis of village gossip.) Indeed, as Larry Diamond's comments at a 2002 APSA meeting make clear, when he talks about years of "troubling reports" from graduate students about collegial and faculty pressure to study one way only, and the anonymity of complaint about Perestroikan issues, it's clear that the substance of the Perestroika complaints were longstanding faculty and grad student gossip fodder.

In the *Pluralist's Guide* case, the gossip was more direct and public in response to the problems of sexism. The blog *What It's Like to Be a Woman in Philosophy* attempts to document issues of sexism in

the profession head-on, by inviting women philosophers to submit anonymous stories of their treatment by colleagues. Its model seems to follow other online shaming sites like harassmap.org - by anonymously calling out pervasive and pathetic sexism, the site would raise enough awareness among the profession to provoke change. The blog was started in 2010 and posts multiple stories, almost daily, from women describing double standards in philosophy. There are no identifying details. They range from the merely appalling - countless stories of sexist jokes and assumptions, a speaker asking an untenured woman faculty member for a "graduate student [he could] fuck" ("Being a Woman. . .", December 11, 2010), to the legally actionable - sexual harassment and attempted sexual assault ("Being a Woman. . .", November 1, 2010 for the latter; various for the former). What is striking is both the relatively longstanding nature of this blog, and the unchanging nature of these reports. They depict a profession that is pervasively disinterested in recruiting and fostering women in its ranks, and a profession that has little interest in feminist philosophy, or sees it as an issue for women only. There are many postings recounting either dismissive attitudes towards feminist philosophy, or assumptions that any ovary-possessing philosopher must ipso facto specialize in feminist philosophy. Sally Haslanger's paper (2008), which presents data on women's relative absence in philosophy and authorship in philosophy journals, as well as top journals' lack of coverage of feminist philosophy, gives some quantitative evidence for this as well. In short, this blog is an online site for institutional gossip - the context that makes the quantitative data in Haslanger's paper all the more damning. The gossip raises the stakes.

Notably, there is a counter blog called *What We're Doing About What It's Like . . .* (started April 2011), which highlights constructive efforts individual faculty and departments are taking to change the climate for women in academic philosophy. These posts are authored (faculty members and department get positive recognition for making changes), which means there's an incentive for departments and faculty members to address the issues. This blog, however, gets many fewer submissions. To be specific, a comparison of submissions for each blog for the months of April, May, September - December 2011, and January 2012, yields 53 submissions to *What We're Doing*, and 80 submissions to *What It Is Like*. This pattern is consistent. More strikingly, between January and May 2013, there were 30 submissions to *What It Is Like*, and only one to *What We're Doing*.

### **Institutional Responses, and Counter-Gossip**

In both cases, there were attempts essentially to make the gossip public, and formalize the criticisms, and it is here that the stories diverge. In the Perestroika case, the initial email - originally sent only to 10 individuals - was immediately and very widely forwarded around political science departments, and an only slightly milder version of the email written by Rogers Smith gained almost 200 signatories in just two months (Monroe, 2005 : 1; Eakin, 2000). The Perestroika conflict actually resulted in some institutional change. Within one year of the original email, prominent political scientists from underrepresented methods were asked to join the APSA governing council, Perestroika supporter Theda Skocpol became APSA president, and APSA created a new journal reflecting methodological diversity ("How Cult Internet Character Mr. Perestroika Divided NYU's Political Science Department"). APSA created several new sections for their conferences to expand methodological diversity; and ultimately, they opened up the elections of officers to APSA (no more unopposed slates being nominated by governing councils).

By contrast, the attempt to formalize the criticism in philosophy met with immediate, sharp, and public rebuke. The lines of authority in philosophy (what programs are best) have long been established through an online guide produced by legal philosopher Brian Leiter. The Philosophical Gourmet Report has become the dominant source for tracking graduate programs' prestige, so much so that terms like "Leiter-top-five [or ten]" are now used colloquially to indicate status. Crucially, Leiter's guide has also been the only major guide to graduate school in philosophy.<sup>2</sup> Brian Leiter also authors and moderates a primary philosophy blog, *Leiter Reports*. A group of philosophers attempted to challenge these rankings in 2011, by assembling an alternate guide to graduate programs. *The Pluralist's Guide* sought to provide both alternative rankings of philosophy programs, and crucially included a climate assessment of good, and bad, graduate programs for women. This alternative ranking system would reflect the

kinds of methodological and demographic criticisms of philosophy present in the institutional gossip. Once the *Pluralist Guide* was released, Leiter began posting about it, far more frequently than on the other philosophy blogs. To be specific, in 2011 Leiter's blog had twenty-eight different posts focused on the *Pluralist's Guide*; by contrast, of the other major philosophy blogs, *Philosophers Anonymous* had eight; *NewAPPS* had four, and *The Philosophy Smoker* three.<sup>3</sup> On his blog, Leiter's summary of the top issues in the philosophy profession for 2011 placed the *Pluralist's Guide* as second in importance (below only a major scandal about academic standards and content being altered at a key philosophy journal as a result of ideological lobbying [*Leiter Reports*, February 17, 2012]). Both are described as "professional misconduct." Leiter's critique of the *Pluralist Guide* is immediately to diminish it; the "SPEP Guide" he repeatedly calls it, as if it is of interest only to a tiny subsection of the field (or members of the Society for Phenomenology and Existential Philosophy). By obvious implication, his guide is not partisan. Most of the postings on the *Pluralist's Guide* (which prompts active discussion on Leiter's blog) focus on the *Climate Guide*; which, as *What It's Like* makes endlessly clear, is a long overdue project. The language is also pretty aggressive, describing the guide as "scandalous," "misleading garbage," "irresponsible," one of the *Pluralist* defenders as a "witness for the prosecution," and the recommendations of the *Climate Guide* "obviously nonsensical" (*Leiter Reports*: July 22 [first two], 27, 15, 2011, respectively). Most oddly, the critics of the *Pluralist's Guide* keep stressing that the climate assessment actually damages the status and prospects of women in the profession.

To be clear, it's not fair to say that the *Pluralist Guide* critics are simply sexist, or disinterested in questions about sexism in the profession. Brian Leiter periodically posts about research documenting the underrepresentation of women in philosophy; and in his comments about the *Pluralist's Guide* climate section, he repeatedly indicates that he thinks there is an issue with sexism in academic philosophy. Several of his active interlocutors publish on feminist philosophy. An alternative possibility is that he has no truck with the kind of anonymous allegations contained in the *What It's Like* blog; and yet, he refers to the blog, endorses it, and even sends his readers there.

Leiter and his many interlocutors critique the climate section largely on its methodology; they claim it is faulty, random, irrational, non-transparent. What the critique sounds like is the age-old criticism of gossip itself (gossip is unruly, irrational, doesn't have to cite its sources, has no transparency.) Indeed, one interlocutor explicitly describes the methodology of the *Climate Guide* as in part consisting of spreading rumors (*Leiter Reports*, July 13, 2011 : comment 27). Philosopher Miranda Fricker's concept of a "prejudicial credibility deficit" well captures what happens here; by diminishing the trustworthiness or reliability of the reporters on the *Pluralist's Guide*, the report itself loses legitimacy (27). This again contrasts to the implied methodology of Leiter's own rankings - a panel of philosophers voting on overall and subdiscipline rankings - as more neutral and reliable. Apparently one set of reputation assessments is *prima facie* more reliable than the other, in part because one set of informants is *prima facie* reliable and trustworthy, and the other merely rumormongers.

The rumour critique is potent - reputations are being attacked with no knowledge - and yet philosophers ranking departments is a less charged, but no less potent, version of the same exercise. "Knowledge" of other departments is largely limited to knowledge of publications; where it's more nuanced (say by talking with colleagues at conferences, interviewing graduate students for positions) is surely analogous to the kind of conversational charge the *What It's Like* blog gets. But the methodology of Leiter's own blog is curiously difficult to critique. Leiter himself is fiercely protective of his reputation; he's quick to defend himself on his blog against accusations of bullying. He's equally quick to deny what happens on his blogs as gossip - his one comment on a flattering portrayal of him in a *Boston Globe* article is to resist the paper's description of his website as a source for gossip about the law profession (Bennett, 2008). Leiter asserts that "professional news (not rumour) is not gossip," which implies that his blogs are simply reportage, neutral description. (Leiter even repeats the conventional definition of gossip as personal only, usually sensational [*Brian Leiter's Law School Reports*, 2008].) And to be specific, Leiter's own (eminently sensible) advice to students considering offers from multiple PhD programs is, in essence, to get the gossip: he encourages students to talk to current students from the PhD programs to find out about "types" of problems (which are all problem

faculty - absent, nasty, sexist, factionalized). While keeping things anonymous, he repeatedly introduces his accounts of very specific issues in departments with comments like "I heard a story" (*Leiter Reports*, "Deciding Between Admissions Offers," April 8, 2013, originally posted March 6, 2009). His reports of third-hand stories are apparently *prima facie* reliable (and, because anonymous, legally protected); this suggests that the problem with the *Pluralist Guide* is that it names names.

The Leiter blog's response, endlessly, to the problem of underrepresentation and sexist treatment of women in philosophy, is to call for the APA to study the problem (*Leiter Reports*, October 14, 2009; October 18, 2009; July 13, 2011). In addition to the obvious futility of this suggestion (given the APA's track record of inaction for the preceding four decades), Leiter's call comes at the very same time that he is justly excoriating the organization for its inability to manage its website or conferences with even minimal competence (*Leiter Reports*, August 3, 2011; September 5, 2011; November 3, 2011). An organization that cannot be trusted to manage basic administrative tasks is surely not up to the job of addressing systematic and pervasive political injustice in the profession it represents.

The consistent responses to the *Pluralist Guide* demanding publicity (public studies, uncritically posting statements from contented graduate students at one of the criticized programs) are part of the problem here. If gossip teaches us nothing else, it demonstrates that what people say on the record can sometimes be crucially false or at least misleading, and that off-the-record comments can be important as well as credible. (Obviously, the reverse is true as well - one does not want to give uncritical credence to gossip, just as one doesn't want to give uncritical credence to a public authority making a claim simply because they do so publically.) Studies of rumor and gossip in the business world treat these as things to be managed or controlled; and yet curiously, one of the few studies that actually tracked the accuracy of business rumors demonstrates the way in which the company rumor mill is a more reliable disseminator of truth than vice presidents (Zaner, 1991 : 133 - 134, 211, 219, 200). Similarly, online discussions of the substantial underrepresentation of women in philosophy often seem a bit scholastic in their tenor - regularly questioning whether or not it's a problem per se that women are so vastly underrepresented in philosophy. Indeed, several commentators explicitly note that the problem of sexism in philosophy should be differentiated from the status of feminist philosophy. However, not conflating the two issues is different from recognizing that there is probably some relationship between the underrepresentation of women and the relative absence and low status of feminist philosophy in major conferences and journals.<sup>4</sup> But of course, if those numbers are placed against the context of the *What It's Like* blog, some obvious causal connections suggest themselves. Women are underrepresented in philosophy; they are underrepresented because many people in the discipline are hostile to women; and this underrepresentation has some disciplinary effects other than the discrimination itself. To be explicit, some recent research demonstrating that "intuitions", the gold standard of analytic philosophy, are deeply gendered (and so, we attribute greater "common sense" truth value to beliefs more commonly held by men) suggest that there is deep epistemic bias in philosophy, analogous to the kind of moral-scale bias Carol Gilligan documented in her work (Stich, 2012).

What the counter-response to the *Pluralist Guide* seems to miss is the necessity of anonymity for the women who contribute to *What It Is Like*. Anonymity provides important cover to permit someone to say something critical about people who have largely unchallenged institutional power. One of the intrinsic problems with the sort of climate surveys promoted by Leiter is that they could only be useful in aggregate - PhD programs in philosophy are small enough that any kind of visible or specific criticism, even if anonymous, would be easily traceable back to a highly vulnerable party. And if *What It is Like* tells us anything, it is that the problems women are facing in philosophy are widespread. Indeed, one of the many ironies in this situation is that Linda Alcoff, one of the three main authors of the *Pluralist Guide*, herself did a climate survey of exactly the kind called for on the Leiter blog, almost two decades ago; she notes that the survey's conclusions about institutionalized sexism in the department were met with a pitched critique of the survey's methodology, and resistance to any broader change (*Pluralist's Guide to Philosophy*, November 9, 2011).

By contrast, the very specific zeroing in on Alcoff on Leiter's blog is highly problematic. There were three principal authors of the *Pluralist Guide* - Alcoff, William Wilkerson, and Paul Taylor - and yet the criticism on Leiter's blog in particular focuses only on Alcoff. She is accused of "staggering" dishonesty (August 15). At one point, Leiter went so far as to run a poll asking readers whether or not Alcoff should resign as incoming president of the Eastern division of the APA (*Leiter Reports*, August 18, 2011). Naturally, the irony here is sharp - had Leiter been successful in forcing Alcoff's resignation, his publicly stated desire for more APA action on the issue of underrepresentation would likely have been even less addressed by the APA, for whomever would follow Alcoff into the post would surely be disinclined to touch such a politically hot subject.

### Invisibility of Gossip

Given that the real subject of debate in these two conflicts is disciplinary boundaries - what do we count as legitimate political science or philosophy research? Who are the real political scientists or philosophers? - what's striking is how relatively quickly and uncontroversially the Perestroika conflict attained some concrete (if modest) gains, and how equally immediately the *Pluralist's Guide* conflict produced only resistance. Why is that, and what might we learn about institutional gossip from this difference? Sidney Tarrow attributes the relative success of the Perestroika movement to the fact that its controversy was always fractal in nature - there was no single grand cleavage in the discipline that was crystallized (so no easy divisions into majority/minority camps, where minority voices could simply be delegitimized from the outset [2008 : 514]). And yet this cannot be the real (or at least the total) story. In the first place, the methodological division largely maps onto the demographic division, in both disciplines (even though political science is noticeably more diverse, at least in gender, than philosophy, the diverse folks are much more represented in the delegitimated subdisciplines of political science). And in the second, the same relationship of divisional/demographic conflict is present in the *Pluralist's Guide* controversy. But the establishment of a gossip narrative provides an alternative read.

The differences in the responses to institutional gossip in these two cases reflects the status difference in gossip. Particularly when we compare the Perestroika case to the *Pluralist* case, what we observe is the way in which gossip by the empowered doesn't count as such - it's simply ignored or erased. This tendency (only to call something gossip or rumour when it's done by the powerless) has a long trajectory: Patricia Turner's case studies of rumours in African-American communities has evidence of this (1993 : 99, 156). Even the first serious scholar of gossip, Max Gluckman, differentiates gossipy discussions that inform academics when they hire colleagues or award grant money as not gossip, because it is not "idle chatter" (1968 : 33). But this, of course, is a self-serving distinction, particularly since Gluckman's own papers on gossip in anthropological work demonstrate that gossip is crucially utilitarian: one cannot get a read on a community, know the social rules of the community, or where one fits, without knowing the gossip (1963 : 309). By contrast, in the Perestroika controversy, even though the initial email is bitter and informal in tone, its substance was immediately registered by legitimate and senior people within the profession. Indeed, the open letter signed by 150 political scientists largely embraces the particular questions Mr. Perestroika raises, but makes them general and impersonal in tone - no name-calling, no polemics, no insinuations of Orwellian power dynamics. The gossip was made public, more generic, and authored. More strikingly, faculty who were relatively high up in the political science power structure not only endorsed the Perestroika call for change, but did so by explicitly asking for public investigations (Diamond, 2002).

Finally, the interrelatedness of the two sets of questions - the demographic concerns with who does political science, and the disciplinary questions of what kinds of political science gets published in the most prestigious journals - were simultaneously recognized. The gossip could have become and stayed personal (attacking the people at the top of APSA), but in fact the public conversation became widely and explicitly institutional in nature. In short, the crucial move in the Perestroika case was an early, and shared, maintenance of focus on the institutional gossip. The gossip began as both personal and institutional, but the public conversation became institutional only. This is what allowed for change.

By contrast, the *Pluralist's Guide* conflict actually narrowed in several ways. First, the two sets of questions raised by the guide were immediately separated by the critics. The longstanding and undeniable demographic issue was acknowledged (to do otherwise would be impossible), but also still professed to be mysterious in its cause (mass, institutional sexism apparently not being on the table for philosophical discussion). The disciplinary questions (the persistent minimizing of feminist philosophy, the sexist assumptions that all and only women do feminist philosophy) were quickly ruled out as irrelevant. Lots of feminist philosophy was just pronounced bad, and the status of feminist philosophy apparently has no relationship to the persistent lack of welcome for women in the discipline.

The debate also narrowed from gossip about the discipline, to an argument about people, or more precisely, two people. The climate section of the *Pluralist Guide* focused so narrowly on just a few suspect departments (3 of the top 4 Leiter programs, as well as one lesser-ranked school, were named as places inhospitable to women), that the broader issues of climate in the profession were left unaddressed. This tight focus also clearly invited defensiveness from the *Leiter Report*, as it suggested that his most highly-ranked departments were particularly inhospitable to women. But more crucially, the fact that only three philosophers came forth as publicly responsible for the *Pluralist Guide* (despite its not-small advisory board), allowed critics like Leiter to paint the *Pluralist Guide* as a personal quest for revenge from disaffected "party-line Continental" philosophers, while making noises towards the need for broader climate assessments. Very tardily (in October 2011) there was a public statement of support for the *Pluralist Guide* from one of the organizations within philosophy (SPEP), but this was far too little, far too late - the narrative had already solidified. The *Pluralist Guide* narrative got redescribed as both a conflict simply between "good" and "bad" philosophy departments (on both sides, thus setting up a cozy straw man - who's going to defend badness?), and a personal grudge match (also on both sides - defenders of the *Pluralist Guide* stressed Leiter's bullying and excessive invective around the *Guide*). This difference in emphasis allowed mainstream philosophers to focus their criticism on a single person, and thus, reduce bigger questions of institutional practice to critique of a single person. In short, they could gossip about Linda Alcoff, while calling it criticism of methodology. The story became about the *Gourmet Report* (which is ultimately Brian Leiter) and its lone critic (who of course was not alone).

It's impossible to ignore the gendered element of gossip in these two stories. In the Perestroika case, the gossip was more initially anonymous, then immediately and publicly claimed by women and men equally. In the *Pluralist's Guide* case, the gossip started and stayed a women's story, told almost entirely by women. The critics were themselves primarily men. The endless criticism of gossip as idle women's talk is played out here: the Perestroika narrative lost its tinge of gossip in part by losing its gendered status; the *Pluralist's Guide* story stayed the talk of women. Fricker's analysis of epistemic injustice is again helpful. Given the fact that systematic dismissal or undermining of testimony is so often along lines of social authority (where those being dismissed are in socially subaltern positions), she suggests that those aspiring to what she describes as "testimonial responsibility" must hold "reflexive critical social awareness" (91). That is to say, those who are in powerful social positions should consider to what extent their social identity is influencing their decisions about who is reliable and trustworthy. The particular lack of consideration of their own privileged social positions from the commentators on the Leiter blog is especially striking.

The difference in outcomes between these two cases suggests that, no matter how much relatively public evidence or acknowledgement of broad truth behind institutional gossip, its epistemic status is unfortunately fragile and tentative. More troublingly, the difference in these two cases suggests also that gossip by the empowered is still an all too effective way to undermine counter-narratives produced by subaltern gossip.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> One small but relevant point here: within philosophy, both supporters and critics of the *Pluralist Guide* have emphasized that there's not an isomorphic relationship between the presence of women in philosophy, and the presence or prominence of feminist philosophy. Not all feminist philosophers are



women; not all women are interested in feminist philosophy. However, some critics of the *Pluralist Guide* have tried to assert that the *Pluralist* authors see an isomorphic relationship, when what's transparently plain (and made so by Alcoff) is that there's a relationship of overlapping spheres of interest.

<sup>2</sup> The academic magazine *Lingua Franca* used to publish a reputable guide for graduate programs in the humanities and social sciences, that included breakdowns of top programs by subdisciplines (a crucial inclusion), but stopped doing so about a decade ago. *US News & World Report's* guide to programs in humanities, for instance, doesn't even include a category for philosophy. The National Research Council lists generic philosophy rankings (no subdisciplines).

<sup>3</sup> Leiter's posts were July 12, 13, 14, 15, 17, 19, 20, 22, 24, 25, 26, 27; August 3, 11, 15 [two], 18; September 21; October 18[two], 31; November 2, 11, 14, 15; December 23, 30. *The Philosophy Smoker* July 22, July 26, August 8; *Philosophers Anonymous* July 20, two on July 22, July 25, August 7, August 11, October 31, November 2; *NewAPPS* July 13, July 15, August 12, and November 11.

<sup>4</sup> Indeed, Sally Haslanger makes this argument explicitly. A graduate student provides testimony of the ways in which these issues are confused by other graduate students as well: *What Is It Like to be a Woman in Philosophy*, May 9, 2012.

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