

▶▶ TO DOCTOR OR NOT TO DOCTOR

The outrage over the op ed in the *Wall Street Journal*¹, in which Joseph Epstein mocked the president elect's partner for styling herself Dr. Jill Biden, was always likely to be short lived. There have been, after all, many more consequential interventions in US politics than this, even though the condescending tone of the piece was clearly intended to cause maximum offence and is related to those deep divisions in American life that erupted so disturbingly in Washington a short time ago. It is also helpful to remember that the media publish op-eds not, as many of my academic colleagues seem to imagine, as a public service to provide a platform for important but otherwise overlooked opinions (i.e., their own), but to stimulate controversy and generate free copy. By the time this blog appears, the "WSJ" will have cashed in and moved on and Dr. Biden will be residing at 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue.

Nonetheless, the whole affair clearly touched a few nerves. Academic twitter was abuzz with (mainly female) academics supporting Dr. Biden—unsurprising, given the political complexion of the academy—but, more interestingly, reflecting on the use of the title itself. Even before the op-ed stirred this pot, there was a well-developed sub-genre of tweets in which the relaxed attitude of older, male professors towards being addressed as "doctor" was identified by younger, female academics as a none-too-subtle put down of their own achievement, which they wished to have formally recognized by more widespread use of the prefix. In spite of (or perhaps because of) being one of the offending OMPs, I had, I confess, dismissed this complaint as yet another manifestation of the anxiety and insecurity that seems to afflict that particular generation, one

unlikely to be assuaged by a mere honorific. As a newly minted PhD, I had been firmly told that the prefix was not in general use in North America (an important geographical marker) and never gave it another thought. The Dr. Biden controversy set me thinking, an unusual sequence of events these days but not unwelcome.

The demand for more widespread use of the title of "Doctor" is about the recognition of status. In traditional societies, status distinctions are generally clear and rigorously enforced, not just by social sanctions but by legal ones as well. As the philosopher Charles Taylor² has famously argued, one of the ironies of modern, egalitarian and individualistic societies is that the desire for recognition does not disappear but, in the absence of clear markers of status found in traditional societies such as ritual forms of salutation or the right to dress in a particular way, becomes even more urgent. The refusal of recognition is that much more painful and damaging. This is why it is not enough for me to say to my junior colleagues "use it if you want to"—to be valuable, there needs to be a generally accepted social practice where those who do not observe it are justly censured. Is that likely to happen?

In the German-speaking lands, from which the modern research-based PhD was brought to North America, a wide variety of doctorates continue to be recognized, indeed indented upon, in ordinary social discourse. They mainly attach to the old academic disciplines—law, medicine, theology—and signify that the bearer has achieved the status of a member of a self-governing profession and is entitled to earn a living in that way. Others, including engineering and forestry,

have gained the same recognition, the Dr.-Ing. being especially well respected.

Here I have to suppress the urge to take this blog in the direction of the controversy over the role of status in technological innovation and entrepreneurship in the nineteenth century (Mokyr)³, merely noting that the German style research PhD was strongly resisted by British and British-influenced universities when it began to be promoted as a vehicle for professional recognition and advancement. The History Faculty at Oxford famously rejected it as entirely unsuitable for preparing "the ordinary man (sic)" for a useful career, which the Faculty argued, encompassed "being a Cabinet Minister, a Bishop, an Ambassador, Viceroy of India, or one of the permanent under-secretaries of the Civil Service" (Howard 1991, 8)⁴. In public administration, indeed, the holder of the PhD was often compared unfavourably with the gentleman amateur—in Yes, Minister, Sir Humphrey Appleby was supremely confident that his First in Greats (classical literature) at Oxford was superior to any number of PhDs in Economics or Chemistry as a qualification for evidence-based decision making⁵—so those insisting on the use of the title were unwittingly underlining their own inferiority. Who wanted to do that?

The suggestion of social awkwardness in the use of the PhD as a prefix, as opposed to a suffix in professional correspondence, was exploited in turn of the (19th/20th) century literature. There is a Leacock short story in which the protagonist, embarking on a steamer with his new degree, hears a request for a doctor to attend to a young lady's injured knee (or was it ankle?). Sprinting to the sick bay he is disappointed to discover



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that a Doctor of Divinity has beaten him to it. How you react to this story today—and to the whole genre of Grossmith⁶—inspired mockery and self-mockery of the upwardly mobile—is unpredictable. Reactions usually range from hilarity to outrage to toe-curling embarrassment, often depending on one's own early experiences of snobbery and one-upmanship. The story certainly raises what is surely the most magnificent red herring in this whole debate, the concern that more widespread use of the PhD as an honorific will lead to dangerous confusion for members of the public seeking urgent medical assistance. Inadvertent harm from a real MD is surely a much more plausible hazard of contemporary life.

But what of the demand for recognition? Have times changed and shall I now step boldly forward as Dr. Rayner on all suitable occasions in solidarity with the much-maligned Dr. Biden? Sadly, snobbery and one-upmanship have not disappeared since Leacock's day, merely taken new and sometimes unexpected forms. Part of the attack on Dr. Biden included the information that her doctorate was earned in Education at the University of Delaware and involved research on leadership in community colleges. Now each of these three elements involves subtle (and sometimes not so subtle) gradations in academic life about which I shall remain discreetly silent. Suffice it to say that I am, I think, justifiably proud of my own PhD from the University of British Columbia, where I received an excellent graduate education in an outstanding political science department. To my undergraduate contemporaries in Economics at Cambridge, that assertion would be merely comic. I fear that those who fondly imagine they will achieve the recognition they crave by demanding students and others address them as "Dr" may achieve some temporary satisfaction but are setting themselves up for new disappointments to come.

References

¹ <https://www.wsj.com/articles/is-there-a-doctor-in-the-white-house-not-if-you-need-an-m-d-11607727380>

² Taylor, C. (1992). The Politics of Recognition. In A. Gutmann (Ed.), *Multiculturalism and the Politics of Recognition* (pp. 25-74). Princeton: Princeton University Press.

³ Joel Mokyr *A Culture of Growth: The Origins of the Modern Economy* Princeton University Press 2016.

⁴ Michael Howard, *The Lessons of History*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991

⁵ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ckgt4VWlsf4>

⁶ George and Weedon Grossmith. *The diary of a nobody*.