Affirmative Action And Women In Science: Post Hoc, Ergo Propter Hoc?

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"The Committee on Affirmative Action and the Status of Women of the Society for [insert organization name here] (a) declares that its primary objective is to render itself obsolete and (b) requests that it be made a permanent, standing committee of the Society, rather than a temporary, ad hoc committee." While such a statement could be issued within any organization, it actually happened twice in the last year within societies to which I belong-one interdisciplinary and one subject-oriented. What in the world is going on when something that was supposed to be temporary wants to become permanent? What, if anything, should we do about it? And who am I to be telling you?

To take the last question first, I am an old-or anyhow aging-tenured, female academic, married to a (the same) fellow scientist for 20-some years, and the holder of a 1968 Ph.D. in astronomy from a reasonably prestigious institution that, at the time, did not admit women students "except under exceptional circumstances." During my graduate student years, there were major observatories that did not assign time to women or appoint them to their staffs, fellowship programs to which only men could apply, and other graduate schools besides mine that had policies against women students as well as faculty. At the time I joined the major American, British, and international astronomical societies, none had ever had a woman president or winner of its most prestigious awards. And yet there were very few complaints, and no committees on the status of women in science.

All of these things have changed. Graduate programs, fellowships, and job opportunities (in the United States and most other countries) are gender-neutral or occasionally even favor female applicants. Women are statistically over-represented among the officers of many societies and have won major prizes in all the ones to which I belong. But there are many more complaints, numerous committees, and a constant barrage of articles bemoaning one aspect or another of the life of an aspirant or practicing woman scientist (of which this is not meant to be one). Where blame is apportioned, the villains are sometimes male scientists, sometimes more senior women, and quite often the very structure of science or society as a whole.

None of this is unique to science or academe. And, therefore, the phenomenon naturally has a name. Several names, in fact, including "rising expectations" within economics and "the Paradox of Progress," according to social scientist Nicholas Rescher. We can all think of examples involving religious, racial, and other historically downtrodden groups.

While it is not quite fair to say that the success of affirmative action directly caused the present high level of discontent among women scientists, it could probably have been predicted. Also perfectly predictable is some level of discontent among white, Anglo-Saxon, Protestant, male scientists, especially ones who do not have the sorts of jobs they originally aspired to. Their discontent is, I think, perfectly rational, and I am therefore grateful that I was hired at the end of the previous era, in spite of being "a small green Martian," not because of it.

Where shall we go from here? You cannot please everybody. A conference in which half the invited speakers are women will go almost unnoticed. (I organized one last year, almost by accident.) With 100 percent women you get in trouble. A woman graduate student at one of my institutions recently decamped without her degree, leaving behind a long and impassioned letter published in *Physics Today* (V. Kistiakowsky, 49[5]:66-8,1996) that cited lack of role models, companionship, and sympathy, although the department had two female faculty members, several postdocs, and half a dozen or so other graduate students. Nevertheless, I think, "The Committee on the Status of Women in . . ." really has rendered itself obsolete.

Should affirmative action of all kinds be abolished? Probably not, despite a popular trend in that direction. But there is not currently a shortage of Ph.D.-level scientists in any discipline, and encouraging students of any gender or race to pursue research-oriented careers is not doing them or anybody a favor. Somehow, there always seems to be a few people for whom science is the only possible way of life, and all that is necessary for the rest of us is to stay out of their way.

Thus it seems to me that the proper role for affirmative action in the future is to make sure the barriers look just as high to white males from advantaged backgrounds as they do to everybody else. Meanwhile, women scientists who feel some lack of company or companionship can perhaps be consoled by the thought of one of my colleagues when she entered her first undergraduate physics laboratory course: "Just look at all the lovely men!"

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