

THE VERGE

Peter Thiel is almost definitely behind this mysterious ‘Heterodox Science’ course

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Earlier this year, the Berkeley Institute, a private academic institution, listed a seminar on “Heterodox Science.” The seminar was first scheduled to begin in November, then moved to January. On the Institute’s website, the instructor of the Heterodox Science course has been described only as “Guest Instructor: Author & Founder of IMITATIO.” The accompanying photo is of the back of a white man’s head. IMITATIO has three founders; two are dead. The third is billionaire PayPal founder, Gawker litigator, ubiquitous venture capitalist, and contrarian Trump advisor, Peter Thiel.

The description of the “Heterodox Science” course, which Berkeley Institute’s director Matthew Rose told me was furnished by the instructor, reads:

From past experience we know that our certitude has often been misplaced and that scientific knowledge has usually been flawed. But what if the present is more like the past than we care to think? What if some of the important things we regard as true will be shown to be mistaken as well? This seminar will discuss possible instances of “heterodox science,” fields of study that dissent from mainstream science. Areas to be examined will include neuroscience and human consciousness; biology and human nature; evolution and sexual differences; and economics and urban social policy.

When I wrote Rose to ask if he would confirm Thiel as the instructor in question, he declined to comment. Between when I contacted him and when this article went to print “Founder of IMITATIO” was removed from the instructor description. (A screenshot from December 9th illustrates the change.) Jeremiah Hall, a spokesperson for Thiel and his family office Thiel Capital, also declined to confirm Thiel was the instructor, or comment further.

As a member of President-elect Trump’s transition team, every avenue of communication is open to Thiel should he care to disseminate his ideas. So why would he choose to teach anonymously at this tiny institute — and what does he actually intend to teach?

The Berkeley Institute isn't part of the University of California, Berkeley, though you'd be forgiven for assuming so due to its name and proximity. Its office is tucked above a Mexican food restaurant half a block from the university. There's a placard out front, and the quaint space is accessible by an external set of stairs. The Institute doesn't seem to have much name recognition on campus; it's only three years old. Though all but one of its "senior fellows" teach at UC Berkeley, out of a handful of UC Berkeley social science professors I spoke with, only one had heard of it, and she didn't know exactly what Berkeley Institute did.

The Institute holds semester-long seminars, as well as occasional conferences and events. Past seminars have ranged from "After virtue: how modern moral thinking went wrong" to "Conversions," a course focused on radical shifts in viewpoint. This summer, the Institute offered a course on sexuality and gender studies; the course description promised it would "seek to enable and empower those who have been discouraged from sharing in academic engagements with these matters." Courses are offered to students from schools in the area, free of charge. The sexuality and gender seminar, which was structured more like an intensive symposium, cost \$100, which covered tuition and room and board for all four days. In 2014, the last publicly available tax filing, the Institute raised under \$200,000 in contributions and grants, and operated at a loss. In the world of academic institutes, the Berkeley Institute runs on a shoestring.

THE INSTITUTE "EXISTS TO SUPPORT AND COMPLEMENT THE WORK OF THE UNIVERSITY, BUT IS INDEPENDENT OF IT"

The Institute both associates itself indirectly with UC Berkeley — its website states that the Institute "exists to support and complement the work of the university, but is independent of it" — and distinguishes its methodology from that of the university. They write: "At prestigious universities like UC Berkeley, students find an opportunity to participate in intellectual discovery of the most advanced kind. But they do not receive a comparable training in the intellectual principles that would help them organize and build on what they learn, to make it a means of achieving clear intellects, virtuous lives, and flourishing communities."

In contrast, the Institute posits itself as a source of education on topics that it believes "conventional" universities like UC Berkeley neglect, such as "religious and classically rational accounts of the human person and human ends." The Institute asserts that "serious exposure to the intellectual giants of western tradition—to Thucydides, Vergil, St. Augustine, or Pascal, for example—often leads students to find a new confidence and independence in addressing the conventional assumptions that surround them." It takes a "special interest in the Christian intellectual tradition."

Given the opacity of the Institute's "Heterodox Science" syllabus, it's impossible to determine what the course will cover. But a review of Thiel's past statements, writings, and investments provides a sense of his potential positions on its subject areas.

"THIS SEMINAR WILL DISCUSS POSSIBLE INSTANCES OF 'HETERODOX SCIENCE'"

What is Heterodox Science? "Heterodox" — coming from the Greek root words heteros, meaning "the other," and doxa, meaning "opinion" — refers to atypical beliefs or those beliefs

which go against prevailing norms. In the modern political context, heterodoxy has been adopted by conservative groups concerned about what they view as a suffocating echo chamber in the liberal academy. The most prominent heterodox organization is the "[Heterodox Academy](#)," which describes itself as an "association of professors who have come together to express their support for increasing viewpoint diversity—particularly political diversity—in universities." Signatories to the "[Heterodox Academy](#)" statement, many of whom are professors at well-reputed universities, have published articles with titles like "Confessions of a Silenced Professor," "What Many Transgender Activists Don't Want You to Know: and why you should know it anyway," "Our Dignity: Right to Guns," and "Engineering the Competition: Affirmative Action as Subsidized Mobility."

Famed psychologist Jonathan Haidt, perhaps heterodoxy's most well-known public advocate, uses the term to highlight his belief that political and ideological uniformity — or a quest for "social justice" — [has led to bias in the social sciences](#). A devotion to heterodoxy often results in a call to diversify academia not by "liberal measures" (race, class, sexuality, etc.) but by viewpoint (engaging more conservatives).

"I believe that the conflict between truth and social justice is likely to become unmanageable," [Haidt writes](#) in an article for the Heterodox Academy entitled "Why Universities Must Choose One Telos: Truth or Social Justice." "Trigger warnings and safe spaces are necessary to protect fragile young people from danger and violence. But such a culture is incompatible with political diversity, since many conservative ideas and speakers are labeled as threatening and banned from campus and the curriculum." He celebrates the idea of "Truth U," a place where "there is no such thing as blasphemy. Bad ideas get refuted, not punished." Haidt positions "SJU" — his term for "the social justice university" — as a place where "there are ideas, theories, facts, and authors that one cannot use."

While it may be compelling in theory, heterodoxy can be fraught in execution because its framework doesn't adequately distinguish between valid, non-mainstream arguments and so-called bad science; a conversation among heterodox researchers may start out with reasonable critiques of liberalism in the academy, and devolve into theories that have been roundly disproven and / or are widely perceived as dangerously intolerant. Such theories can include creationism, climate change denial, or scientific racism.

While Peter Thiel has been tight-lipped about his relationship with heterodox science, IMITATIO, the organization the Berkeley Institute references, offers some clues to his interest in atypical thinking. Philosopher René Girard, scholar Robert Hamerton-Kelly, and Thiel co-founded [IMITATIO](#) in 2007 to support the "development and discussion of René Girard's 'mimetic theory' of human behavior and culture." Mimetic theory, the concept that humans are fundamentally imitative, has had a profound effect on Thiel, who calls Girard "[the one writer who has influenced me the most](#)." Girard, who died last year, was Thiel's professor at Stanford; they knew each other for more than 25 years.

Thiel [has said](#): "Thinking about how disturbingly herdlike people become in so many different contexts—mimetic theory forces you to think about that, which is knowledge that's generally

suppressed and hidden. As an investor-entrepreneur, I've always tried to be contrarian, to go against the crowd, to identify opportunities in places where people are not looking.”

This subversiveness maps neatly not only onto Thiel's contrarian investment strategies, but onto his calls for increased diversity of thought — so-called heterodoxy — within what he perceives as a stultified academy.

“Girard ranges over everything: every book, every myth, every culture — and he always argues boldly. That made him stand out against the rest of academia, which was and still is divided between two approaches: specialized research on trivial questions and grandiose but nihilistic claims that knowledge is impossible,” Thiel has said. “Girard is the opposite of both: He makes sweeping arguments about big questions based on a view of the whole world... there is already something heroic and subversive about his work.” To Thiel, Girard's approach to academia was both rare and precious.

Thiel has his mentor's propensity for sweeping arguments, as evidenced by his public views on the Heterodox Science seminar's core subject areas.

“NEUROSCIENCE AND HUMAN CONSCIOUSNESS”

Thiel has supported artificial intelligence think tanks, nanotechnology, and robotics. In a 2012 Stanford course Thiel gave on startups, he taught that “people tend to overestimate the likelihood or explanatory power of the convergence and cyclical theories. Accordingly, they probably underestimate the destruction and singularity theories,” he said. These “underestimated” theories are that either “some technological advance will do us in,” or “technological development yields some AI or intellectual event horizon.” One of Thiel's core beliefs is that the future, whatever its particular shape, will be nearly unrecognizable to the present.

“BIOLOGY AND HUMAN NATURE”

In a 2009 Cato Institute essay called “The Education of a Libertarian,” Thiel wrote “Since 1920, the vast increase in welfare beneficiaries and the extension of the franchise to women — two constituencies that are notoriously tough for libertarians — have rendered the notion of “capitalist democracy” into an oxymoron.” Women's suffrage, in this stated view, has been a hindrance to the United States' development. Thiel also wrote about women in his 1996 book *The Diversity Myth: Multiculturalism and Political Intolerance on Campus*, where he questioned the accounts of rape victims; he has since disavowed those statements.

Thiel was scheduled to speak at the Property and Freedom Society's conference in Turkey this fall; the society, which says it is committed to “uncompromising intellectual radicalism,” has hosted a number of high-profile white nationalists. After *The Huffington Post* asked for comment, Thiel's name was removed from the society's schedule. Thiel has neither publicly supported nor disavowed scientific racism, a guiding belief of white nationalists. Scientific racism posits behavior and intelligence as matters of nature, not nurture, and anoints white people society's “natural” leaders; adherents refer to this belief as the “human bio-diversity movement” (HBD).

“EVOLUTION”

In a conversation with *The Washington Post*, Thiel said, “I believe that evolution is a true account of nature, but I think we should try to escape it or transcend it in our society.” Thiel later told *The New Yorker* of Darwinian evolution: “‘I think it’s true,’ he said, ‘but it’s also possible that it’s missing a lot of things, and it’s possible it’s not the most important thing.’ Global warming is also ‘probably true,’ but the matter is too clouded by political correctness to be properly assessed.”

Thiel is a strong proponent of extending human lifespans: “I believe if we could enable people to live forever, we should do that. I think this is absolute,” he has said. As a believer in cryonics and a multi-million dollar investor in a variety of life-extension projects, Thiel is on a mission to cure what he sees as the problem of mortality. “Basically, I’m against it,” Thiel has said of death.

“SEXUAL DIFFERENCES”

At the Republican National Convention this past summer, Thiel stood onstage and declared “I am proud to be gay. I am proud to be a Republican. But most of all I am proud to be an American. I don’t pretend to agree with every plank in our party’s platform; but fake culture wars only distract us from our economic decline, and nobody in this race is being honest about it except Donald Trump.”

He went on to say, “Now we are told that the great debate is about who gets to use which bathroom. This is a distraction from our real problems. Who cares?” In less than two minutes, Thiel acknowledged his own marginalized sexual identity and spoke against the concerns of transgender Americans, while supporting a party whose platform calls for the repeal of gay marriage.

Yet years after Gawker disclosed Thiel’s homosexuality, Thiel went on to bankroll the Hulk Hogan lawsuit which would put them out of business. After Thiel sued Gawker, Milo Yiannopoulos, alt-right website *Breitbart News*’ technology editor, who is also gay, called Thiel “the hero Silicon Valley needed.”

“ECONOMICS AND URBAN SOCIAL POLICY”

Thiel is a self-described Libertarian. In that same 2009 Cato Institute essay, Thiel identified three new frontiers that humans can pursue as alternatives to what he perceives as an unfree world: cyberspace; outer space; and seasteading. He went on to write that he “no longer believe[s] that capitalism and democracy are compatible” — the latter being doomed. Thiel has also written about the value of what he calls “creative monopolies,” and has envisioned an “escape from politics in all its forms.” *The Economist* said Thiel’s become “not so much a libertarian as a corporate Nietzschean, who believes in the power of gifted entrepreneurs to change the world through the sheer force of will and intellect.”

Heterodoxy is a significant piece of the PC-culture backlash. The line is short between questioning established principles of biology and human nature, for instance, and exhorting

racial and sexual minorities to assume greater responsibility for their disadvantaged position in society. Such conversations, many heterodox philosophers say, should be encouraged and openly aired if the academy is to privilege truth over social justice. (Liberal academics would argue that truth and social justice are not incompatible, but complementary concepts.)

Thiel is now the key liaison between Silicon Valley and the White House; he has influential investments spread across all sorts of industries, from space to sea to the sharing-economy; and he has the ear of the president-elect. While the Berkeley Institute is likely to admit only a handful of people to its heterodox science seminar, the ideas taught there may ripple out much farther.