

LISTEN LIBERAL

— or —

WHAT EVER HAPPENED
TO THE PARTY OF
THE PEOPLE?



THOMAS FRANK

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF
WHAT'S THE MATTER WITH KANSAS?



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The Introduction to *Listen, Liberal* incorporates several passages about income inequality that were published over the course of 2014 in *Salon*, the online magazine, as well as passages that appeared in columns for *Harper’s Magazine*, one from September 2012 and one from September 2013. Chapter Seven includes bits of an essay that appeared in *Bookforum* in the fall of 2013 and also expands on *Salon* essays that appeared in March 2014, August 2014, and January 2015. Chapter Eight incorporates part of a *Harper’s Magazine* column for September 2012.

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THE PATHOLOGIES OF PROFESSIONALISM

Having people of talent run the vast federal apparatus is clearly a desirable thing. The EPA and the Nuclear Regulatory Commission ought to be under the direction of people who know what they're doing, as surely as qualified engineers should design our bridges and historians should be the ones who teach history.

But what are we to make of our modern-day technocracy, a meritocracy of failure in which ineffectual people rise to the top and entire professions (accountants, real-estate appraisers, etc.) are roiled by corruption scandals?

The answer is that the professional ideology brings with it certain predictable, recurring weaknesses. The first of these pitfalls of professionalism is that the people with the highest status aren't necessarily creative or original thinkers. Although the professions are thought to represent the pinnacle of human brilliance, what they are actually brilliant at is defending and applying a given philosophy. In *Disciplined Minds*, an important description of the work-life of professionals, the physicist Jeff Schmidt tells us that "ideological discipline is the master key to the professions." Despite the favorite Sixties slogan, professionals do not question authority; their job is to apply it. This is the very nature of their work and the object of their training, according to Schmidt; by his definition, professionals are "obedient thinkers" who "implement their employers' attitudes" and carefully internalize the reigning doctrine of their discipline, whatever it happens to be.²⁹

In addition, the professions are structured to shield insiders from accountability. This is what defines the category: professionals do not have to listen. They are the only occupational group, as the sociologist Eliot Freidson put it many years ago, with "the

preliminary edits. Dean Baker was a good sport through my many, many queries to him.

Jeff Schmidt helped me comprehend professionalism; Zillah Eisenstein had special understanding of the character of Hillary Clinton; Brendan Williams explained Obamacare to me; Milford Bateman walked me through the disasters of microfinance; Barry Lynn helped me understand antitrust; Bill Black knew about Dodd-Frank and the decline of professionalism; Peter Edelman gets welfare reform like nobody else; Heather Ann Thompson and Jessica Steinberg were enormously helpful on mass incarceration; Paul Maliszewski helped me track the creative class; and Bill Curry laid out the grand narrative of Democratic failure. Johann Hari had many brilliant suggestions for this book; Chris Shiflett had one big genius insight; Barbara Ehrenreich effortlessly saw through and diagnosed the nonsense latent in any subject I brought to her attention.

Joe Spieler handled my literary affairs with humor and proficiency. Prudence Crowther did a superlative copy edit. Sara Bershtel and Riva Hocherman deserve the biggest helping of gratitude there is, this time for transforming a sprawling manuscript into a proper book. It was one hell of a sprint this time, but thanks to them it got done.