

Analysis of a Racism Hoax at Oberlin College

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ABSTRACT

It is often alleged that American society is racist, even though it is acknowledged that overt expressions of racism are extremely rare. How do people know that it is racist, then? This paper raises the possibility that this claim of racism is based on a projection. Our times have seen an overthrow of Oedipal psychology, in which the father represents objective reality, which gives us no special place. This overthrow has been in the name of the omnipotent mother, who loves us just because we are who we are. She disdains the father. Her children join her in that and believe that the love she gave him, which he was supposed to have earned, had been stolen from them. If it had not been, they would have been untouched by anything but love; an image I call the "pristine self." It has been stolen from some children more than from others, and the task of the other children is to hate the father and love those, paradigmatically of other races, who have lost the most love in the past. The deprivation of this perfect love is projected onto the father and experienced as racism. Among those who adopt this view, it provides the basis for their experience of the world, and of their proper place within it, but it is entirely in the mind and hence rests on faith. They need to keep this faith constantly renewed. I illustrate this through an analysis of the response to a racism hoax at Oberlin College in 2013, centering around an anti-racist convocation, which I compare to a religious revival meeting.

Writing in a peer-reviewed scientific publication, Sara Winter, a psychologist, says:

All the white people I know deplore racism. We feel helpless about racial injustice in society, and we don't know what to do about the racism we sense in our own groups and lives. Persons of other races avoid our groups when they accurately sense the racism we don't see (just as gays spot heterosexism in straight groups, and women see chauvinism among men). Few white people socialize or work politically with people of other races, even when our goals are the same. We don't want to be racist - so much of the time we go around trying not to be, by pretending we're not. Yet, white supremacy is basic in American social and economic history, and this racist heritage has been internalized by American white people of all classes. We have all absorbed white racism; pretence (sic) and mystification only compound the problem. (Winter, 1977; cited in Sue, 2010)

This woman appears to be living in a miasma; a world suffused with racism, which she hates, but which she senses is everywhere, even in the people she knows and herself. This is an experience of the world as polluted and toxic.

Is she correct? Is American society suffused with racism? The prevailing orthodoxy,

at least within academia, is that it is. But this is odd, especially since it is uniformly acknowledged that overt racism is extremely rare in our time. And Winter herself provides an example of this peculiarity. She and her friends hate racism, she says, and from this I assume we can infer her that they are not overtly racist; but racist, it appears to her, they are.

So what can this racism be? Is it covert? But covert means it cannot be seen. And how can people know that it is there if they cannot see it?

Is it unconscious? That is often said, but when it is said, it is not generally said by people who have very much understanding of the nature of the unconscious. If they did, they would know that when the unconscious expresses itself in behavior, the relationship between the two is never straightforward. For example, it may take the form of reaction formation, in which the behavior that represents the unconscious feeling takes the form of doing the opposite of what the feeling would seem to call for.

I am going to take a different approach to this. I am going to argue that the perception of American society as suffused with racism is not a veridical perception, but a projection. People see it there because they have placed it there.

But would that not again mean that they are racist? After all, if they are projecting it outside themselves, would that not imply that they have it to begin with?

I think not, or at least not in a way that a simple yes or no could comprehend. The issue is far more complex, and certainly far more interesting, than that simple binary can represent. The issue, I suggest, is not a matter of where is the racism and how much is there. The question is what do people mean when they say that the world is suffused with racism? What is their experience of being in the world that has led them to say that?

So this is not a question that has an easy answer. I am going to approach it by exploring a series of events that took place a couple of years ago at Oberlin College.

Oberlin Under Siege

Oberlin College is a passionately liberal liberal arts college in Northeast Ohio. Proud of its role as a way station in the Underground Railroad, and of the fact that it was one of the first American colleges to admit black students and to have men and women study together, it was stunned by an efflorescence of racist, anti-Semitic, and anti-gay materials in February, 2013. (See Note 1)

This stuff, which was quite nasty, included slurs written on posters celebrating

Black History Month, graffiti labeling a water fountain as for whites only, a swastika written on a Science Center window, and various crude flyers. (For some samples, see Jacobson, 2013c)

To be sure, there had been incidents of such abuse in the past, but the wave that took place in February seemed to represent a quantum leap.

The level of alarm was high and the response was impressive. Rallies and marches with titles such as "March of Solidarity" and "Stand Up, Sit In" took place. Student groups offered their facilities as places where students could find safety and begin to heal from the pain these assaults had caused them

The abuse seemed to taper off in late February, when, it was later learned, two students who were responsible for at least most of the incidents were apprehended. However, the community reached a new level of alarm on the morning of March 5. Then, a black student named Sunny Tabler driving to Afrikan Heritage House, her dormitory, sometime before 1:15 AM, saw what she thought was a person in the regalia of the Ku Klux Klan.

Doubling back to make sure of her sighting, she was unable to confirm it, and her boyfriend,, who was driving with her, did not see it. However, upon reaching AHH she reported the incident to her resident assistant, who suggested she call campus Safety and Security. They checked into the matter and did not find anyone in a KKK suit; they did, however, see somebody wrapped in a blanket.

By 1:30, according to a detailed timeline prepared by some of the students (Students of the Africana Community, 2013), the Resident Assistants had began awakening their students, who assembled in the dormitory lounge. By 1:45 students from elsewhere on campus had begun to arrive.

Interviewed subsequently on NBC's Today program, a student who was there reported that "It was completely scary. Everyone in that room was like crying, shaking, and they were like completely scared for like the whole night."

At approximately 2:20 AM the Oberlin Police Department arrived and, along with Oberlin Safety and Security, answered questions regarding the investigation of the apparent KKK sighting and other events from the past month.

Eric Estes, the Dean of Students. who had been contacted by a student at 1:26 arrived at 1:40, and was joined at 2:49 by Marvin Krislov, President of the College, who he had notified. At 5:20, although initially reluctant, in response to student demands and the fact that the Africana Studies Department had cancelled classes and called a Teach-In for noon, the Administration cancelled classes and endorsed the planned gathering.

The Teach-In, called a "Day of Solidarity," was attended by about a thousand students, faculty, and staff, and included the formation of student working groups that would draft proposals for institutional change. It attracted the attention of just about all the news media in the country and support from groups far and wide. Lena Dunham, an alumna and creator of the celebrated television series *Girls*, tweeted: "Hey Obies, remember the beautiful, inclusive and downright revolutionary history of the place you call home. Protect each other."

Protect each other from what?

The hoax

An analysis of the Oberlin police files released in August to blogger Chuck Ross at *The Daily Caller* (2013), as a result of a Freedom of Information Act request, revealed that the racist materials disseminated in February had been produced by two students who were acting as "trolls," seeking to get a rise out of the community. As the story developed, especially through the work of William Jacobson at the blog *Legal Insurrection*, it was learned that they were not racists, and in fact one was a well-known campus activist who had worked widely for liberal causes, including the Obama elections. Most interestingly, the College administration had known this by, at latest, February 27, when these students were arrested and, in the presence of College security officials, confessed (Jacobson, 2013 a, c). Yet, aside from letting on that they believed the incendiary work to have been the product of a small number of students who had been removed from campus, the Administration gave no hint that the whole business had been a hoax. They allowed the dominant view of the work as a racist attack to continue and to drive the campus reaction.

The case of the spectral Klansman displays a similar lapse. Let us consider the question of what could possibly have been the purpose of a Klansman, wearing his regalia, (See Note 2) to walk around the Oberlin College campus at 1:00 on a winter's morning? The regalia, after all, exist for the purpose of intimidation, and to conceal the identity of the individuals taking place in the act of intimidation. But there is nothing intimidating about a single individual walking around a campus at 1 AM. Intimidation would require that the individual make his presence known. But this person was seen only by accident, and clearly did not do anything to create a visible presence. If there was anybody who was threatened, there in the midst of thousands of healthy college students all of whom would regard him as the devil, it would have been the Klansman himself, and he would have been creating this entirely avoidable threat to himself for no conceivable purpose.

Therefore, if the police recognized that the person *could* have been a student wearing a blanket, and they *knew* that there was a person wearing a blanket, then,

given the probabilities involved, the presumption had to be that that *was* what it was.

Taking all this together, it is clear enough that the identification of the figure as a student in a blanket was almost certainly correct. Moreover, we have reached this interpretation by a process of analysis that was obvious and by no means arcane. Anyone who was not committed to being credulous could have arrived at it and probably did. But this interpretation, even though it would presumably have prevented a considerable amount of fear and suffering, was not taken into consideration in any substantive way, either by the police or by Krislov and his administration, which was entirely apprised of the situation but allowed it to build into the hysteria leading to the cancellation of classes.

In response to the bloggers' revelation of the hoax, the Administration (2013) defended its support for the mobilization through a statement which says, in part:

These actions were real. The fear and disruption they caused in our community were real... we draw the line at threats and harassment of any kind. We will not tolerate acts of hatred and threats of violence regardless of motivation.

Jacobson responded that the actions inflicted real pain, to be sure, but that they did so because the students thought they were genuine expressions, rather than a hoax. He likened the situation to someone sounding a fire alarm, and the administration, while knowing that the alarm was a prank, continued to let people believe there was a real fire

So what was going on here? Jacobson's charge is basically that Oberlin's failure was a failure to represent reality. The fear and disruption were contingent upon the students believing that there was real threat. The administration knew that there was not, but didn't tell them. Why not?

I would like to address this question obliquely by suggesting that it did not matter whether Krislov and his administration represented reality in the way that Jacobson and others had in mind. They would not have succeeded in doing so even if they had tried.

The truth is that reality was defined in a quite different way than we are accustomed to seeing and that Krislov had no standing as an authority to represent that reality. In fact, it was defined against him.

Consider this video, which is part of an interview with Krislov broadcast on CNN:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JGwkQCgrLwM> (See Note 3)

The back story here is that Krislov's administration was seen as having taken credit for shutting down the College, but he was not entitled to it. This charge was made by a large group of black students and their allies, who claimed he had not responded immediately to their "demand" that the administration shut the campus down, and only after they had threatened to blockade the buildings. (Students of the Africana Community, *op. cit.*). He had, after all, arrived at 2:49 AM and had not cancelled classes until 5:20. The administration's concern, at the time, that: "canceling classes ... would be 'giving in' to recent events and would 'disrupt our commitment to learning' " was dismissed.

The disrespect shown to Krislov, and his passivity in the face of this disrespect, are obvious. But even more interesting is what happened afterward.

It appears that there was some feeling, among some students, that Krislov had been treated disrespectfully by this group, evidently under the leadership of the Senior Class President, a "trans" person named AD Hogan (personal pronouns "they, them, theirs"), and that this called for a formal apology. The petition provoked a high level of student response. Hogan (2013) did not apologize, but claimed, instead, to be appalled by the negative response that the petition represented.

Students who are not directly targeted by recent events cannot judge nor invalidate the actions of students who are continually marginalized and oppressed, institutionally and interpersonally; instead, we all must listen to the experiences of students of color and queer students and must commit ourselves to allyship when asked to... We all must engage in allyship; allyship means to be committed to actions, accountability, and self-reflection that aim to dismantle structural injustices and daily microaggressions. Allyship requires much more than attending a rally or a convocation and does not include demonizing students who engage in direct action...

Given the choice of whether to oppose or support the disrespect shown to Krislov, it seems that students overwhelmingly chose the latter. I was not able to find any public support for the petition at all, even from those who had signed it.

Characteristic was the response of a student name Megan Bautista (2013), who claimed that Hogan and the other students had been

respectfully, peacefully, and 'properly' addressing the issues of racism, homophobia, anti-Semitism and general bigotry on this campus for years ...

yet have received little to no recognition from the administration and have made little to no advances... If I had an ounce of the passion that AD had, and if that single ounce was squelched in the fashion that it has been, and if after that a Ku Klux Klansman was spotted walking around my campus and the administration felt that it was not an appropriate cause for immediate action and class cancellation, and if even after all of that the administration made a public appearance to the media that not only completely ignored and diminished my efforts and acted as though my ounce of passion didn't exist and as though they were entirely responsible for any semblance of change and response going on, I would chant "no bull shit" too.

In response to this and several others, the author of the petition, Emily Robinson, (2013) apologized and groveled:

I want to sincerely thank everyone who took the time to share opinions, concerns and criticisms of our letter with me...When I started hearing concerns about the letter I had written, I was surprised. I was hearing that people felt that our words were silencing and invalidating their anger, which was not an effect that I expected the letter to have... I did not anticipate how far-reaching the effects of the letter would be...I have been attending work- shops and having conversations with many people who have helped me realize the harmful effects of the letter. I now understand how so many people felt that the letter attempted to silence their anger, invalidate their feelings, and minimize the importance of the causes they are fighting for.

I would like to sincerely apologize to everyone who felt silenced, personally attacked or invalidated in any way by the words that I wrote. I now have a much deeper understanding of why the words were so hurtful, and sincerely regret having harmed any members of our community.

What we can see here, I will argue, is a clash between two definitions of reality. One is the definition which seems most familiar to us. Within this reality, there are a number of objective features that bore upon the state of the college at that point, including whether the threat was real and whether cancelling classes would represent "giving in" to the perpetrators. Krislov, by virtue of his formal position as the President of the college, would have been authorized to make a decision based on the full range of those circumstances and his assessment of the ramifications of his decision in the future. But in the other reality Krislov was no figure of authority. The feelings of the black students were paramount and objective reality was not an issue. If Krislov did not take orders, he was to be held in contempt.

I suggest that it is in this second idea of reality that we find the idea of the ubiquity of racism. And there can be no doubt about which definition of reality carried the day here.

The question becomes, what are the dynamics of this second idea of reality? That is the question to which I will now turn, and in doing so, I will show how it is that Krislov had no standing, but had become an object of contempt.

Oedipal Psychology, Anti-Oedipal Psychology, and the Pristine Self

The approach I will take here is psychoanalytic. A word needs to be said about that.

When we deal with matters of political correctness, we are engaged with phenomena that are incomprehensible as long as we look at them as the product of rationality. Anyone with an eye for these sorts of things will find that eye strained on a daily, and even on an hourly basis. Now is not the time to enumerate the categories of such irrationality (For that, see e.g. Schwartz 2003, 2010), but only to say that the study of irrationality is necessary for their comprehension, and that psychoanalytic thought is predominant, for its depth and systematic development, among the modalities of such understanding. More than anything else, it is the rational study of the irrational.

Psychoanalysis offers us leverage in understating irrational social phenomena because its basic premise is that our earliest understandings of the world and ourselves are formed long before ideas were held to the constraints imposed by logic. Their meanings were formed by emotional dynamics and reason had nothing to do with them. Moreover, these early experiences form the core around which our later and more realistic understandings are built. The secret of understanding such irrationality as we find in political correctness, therefore, is to make sense of emotional reality, and this is the aim of psychoanalysis.

The primary theoretical component of the psychoanalytic study of socialization and social phenomena is what Freud called the Oedipus Complex.

Many have remarked that Freud's idea of the Oedipus Complex, is derived from his society and in his time, and that his thoughts no longer apply to the world as we now know it and how socialization now takes place. Maybe so, but what we rarely see accomplished is a serious accounting of how socialization has been transformed and what the consequences of something so basic are likely to be.

As Freud told the story, the child's psychological life begins with what he called primary narcissism: a state of boundariless fusion with a loving mother who is the whole world to the child. But primary narcissism is exploded by the presence of

father, who has a relationship with mother that is not structured around the child. At first, Freud says, the child hates father for this crime and wants to kill him. But this is not a realistic program, and over time the child comes to identify with and internalize the father, forming the superego.

But the Oedipus complex is far from a simple matter of interpersonal relations within the family. It needs to be understood along a dimension of abstraction that runs, on one end, from simple biology to, on the other, philosophical conceptions of ultimate meaning. Our primary focus in this analysis will be on the cultural level, where what is at issue is the meaning of social interaction.

At that level, the father, in his connection with mother that destroys primary narcissism and excludes the child from the primordial fusion with her that he enjoyed, or fantasized that he enjoyed, is acting as a representative of objective reality, which does not allow such fusion, beyond infancy, except within psychosis.

The presence of the father in the life of the mother tells us that the word does not revolve around us. We are finite and limited and what we want will not come to us just because we want it. This is the basis upon which we come to the very realistic understanding that if we want to have something, we will have to do something in order to get it.

Yet the father also represents the idea that we can have what we desire, as it appears that he does. We cannot take father's place, Freud reminds us; certain things are his prerogative. But we can take him as a model that we can follow and, in doing so, become again the center of a loving world as we were as children when the world was a loving mother..

In this scenario, father represents the capacity to work within the objective world and accomplish something that is worth accomplishing. As the child understands it, he has done something that has gained him the secure place within mother's love that the child needs him to have (Chasseguet-Smirgel, 1988) and that, carrying his own childhood still within him, he needs to have in his own right.

The development of the father's role; which psychoanalysis calls the paternal function, proceeds through the development of what Lacan calls the symbolic, but which I prefer to think of as objective self-consciousness (Schwartz, 2003, 2010). This is a way for people to understand themselves, not as they really are, whatever that would mean, but as objects; as others who are not emotionally connected with them, and have no particular feeling for them, could understand them. In this way, they can predict and coordinate with others with whom they are mutually indifferent, making it possible to have organization: the creation of stable exchange relationships and mutually defined and coordinated roles, taking the form at the

societal level of social structure. Along with these has come everything that organization, beginning with the common possession of language, has helped to create.

But the premise in all this is that the child sees a loving bond between father and mother. What if that idea becomes impossible to maintain? What if the mother disdains, hates, and has contempt for the father?

Why would she not? Consider the image of mother in the mind of the child: she is absolutely loving, and in her love she is omnipotent. She can make our lives perfect just by her very presence.

If she identified with that image, she could only see father as weak, debased, and contemptible. If he were seen in that way, the idea that the child would identify with and internalize the father in order to gain her love would fall by the wayside. His image of the father would change entirely.

He could not have earned her love by his accomplishments; vile as he is, he could not have had any accomplishments. He did not earn mother's love at all, but gained it by illegitimate means; in effect he stole it. He took it through fraud or power, or even through the threat of rape or death. Whatever he has done that had previously been thought to have earned him a place in mother's love would come to be seen as a sham and a pretense, a corrupt product and a waste of resources.

And this social structure that he talks about, the organizations he has created, the achievements that organization has made possible, these have just been means for channeling the stolen love to himself. The message that he brought by displacing us from the center of mother's love; the message of our finitude and limitation, that the world does not revolve around us, would have been revealed as a lie.

Under this way of seeing things, gaining mother's love would be a matter of joining her in her disdain and helping to get rid of him. Do that and we would lose nothing of any value, becoming instead, again, the center of a loving world. And what a wonder life would be then! Her love, her omnipotence, her perfect encouragement of us in the fullness of our creativity would create a world in which we could do what we want and be loved for it. Mother's love would make our lives flawless and abundant. If father had not stolen her love away from us we would be touched by nothing but love.

I refer to this image of the self as untouched by anything but love as the *pristine self* (Schwartz, 2015). The maternal approach to the self normalizes the pristine

self and primary narcissism.

Since the father's "achievements" have been bogus, we cannot understand his claims of worthiness as being based on his actions, but can only understand them as being rooted in his identity, which necessarily embraces those who are like him. This is the root of the concept of white privilege.

We can understand, as a corollary, why some have been more loved than others. Channeling the stolen love to himself and those who were like him, which in this case means the heterosexual, white, cis-gendered males, has had the consequence that those who are not like him have been especially deprived.

Their deprivation has been a function of a dimension of their identity in which they differ from the oppressive father. This means that in American society where the paradigmatically oppressed group has been African-Americans, objective self-consciousness and social structure are racist.

As we reconceive the world in this way, social reality is not made out of objective factors such as the division of labor and the structures of exchange, but around moral factors, such as the polarity of racism and oppression, on one hand, and anti-racism, which is seen as the pursuit of social justice, on the other. Structures of exchange are not objective features of the world; they are the manifestations of the father, which is to say the white, heterosexual, cis-gendered male, and are in no way independent of the way specific groups feel about them.

There is an interesting aspect of this that bears mention. One rarely, if ever, sees "social justice" used in reference to an objective state of affairs; a type of social structure that will be more just than we have now. It is always used as a negation of social injustice. The point is that, linguistically, in the binary social justice/social injustice, the latter term bears the weight of meaning. Social justice is simply the absence of social injustice, and social injustice is simply justice that has been perverted and corrupted by social factors, such as racism. Social justice, then, is a misleading term. In the absence of corruption by social factors, the result is simply justice, the modifier "social" adds nothing to its substantive content. The result of this is to undermine claims about the structural importance of such social factors as racism, which now are asserted to be basic elements of social structure.

In the transformation of objective reality into a manifestation of oppression, psychoanalysis will suspect the operation of paranoia, of which Freud (1922) says

We are reminded that sufferers from persecutory paranoia ... cannot regard anything in other people as indifferent, and they, too, take up minute indications with which these other, unknown, people present them, and use them in their delusions of reference.

And it will recognize the fundamental dynamic of paranoia, which is projection.

No one can live in society without objective self-consciousness; it is the very premise of language. In order to get rid of objective self-consciousness, we must expel it from ourselves and project it on to something else. The father will do very nicely here, since it is after all the paternal function that is bringing us the news we cannot stand. So instead of hating this news of limitation within ourselves, we will find it in the father, call it racism or whatever, and hate it there.

In this way, we do what projection does. We transform an intra-psychic conflict into an interpersonal one. Instead of tearing ourselves apart, we can, in our fantasy, tear him apart, and emerge from this, again in our fantasy, whole, beautiful, and perfect: the pristine self. We can build a whole world out of this, and each of us can find our place within it, and especially those who have been deprived in the past.

We therefore redefine the world as a venue for this struggle, and we redefine ourselves through our roles in this struggle.

Having redefined ourselves in this way, we have made ourselves dependent, for our sense of identity, on the existence and pervasiveness of the racism that we have created through our projection. That is the condition, in which Sara Winter, who wrote our opening paragraph, finds herself.

A critical feature of the world that is defined in terms of this struggle is that it cannot be validated by comparison with external, objective reality, as the world established by the paternal function can. Since its defining elements are subjective, it exists only in the mind and loses its existence when it is not being conceived. It therefore can only be kept alive by the continual stimulation of its presence in the mind.

All of this has programmatic implications. Our aims must be:

- 1) Hate the father for stealing mother's love. Destroy and demystify the instrumentalities of his theft and the artifacts he has created to enhance the idea of his worth, which now come to be defined as white supremacy. This includes, *tout court*, the very idea of objective reality. Given our narcissistic premise, objective reality, is not defined. Indifference is seen as hatred.

This hatred, obviously, must be intensified in the case of the sons of the father; they are "like" him and are the heirs of "white privilege," which they did nothing to earn. The fact that there has been a bait-and-switch here; that they are being

charged with not having individually earned advantages that their group collectively created and bestowed, is not generally recognized as a rejoinder. What they are stuck with in their incapacity to identify with their fathers is that they cannot accept, with gratitude, and perhaps with recognition of the ancient injunction that from those to whom much has been given, much will be expected, the fruits of the accomplishments he wrought for their benefit.. Rather, they must hate the father, not only for his crimes, but for depriving them of their innocence.

- 2) Love those who have been especially deprived of love in the past, which is to say those who were not like the father. They are most entitled to love and most justified in their hatred of the father. The structure of the world, that is to say, is redefined through the strength of one's appeal to mother's love on the basis of past deprivation. We must support those who make this claim most strongly in their hatred.

We can see that this is not just a moral imperative. It has ramifications on every level. To begin with, it is a structural necessity. When people speak of 'structural racism,' we tend to put the emphasis on the 'racism,' but more important is the 'structural' part. In a world like this, structural racism is the only structure that there is.

We can take this a bit farther and bring it back to our reason for being here: understanding toxicity. Toxicity turns out to be a structural feature of the world defined in this way.

There is also a secondary gain from this in the form of political identity and the way one sees the meaning of one's life. Political identification gives us a place in the world redefined in this way. To be sure, it is the only place available. On the other hand, the appeal it offers in the way of heroism is considerable.

This will be particularly so in the case of women, who can much more easily identify with mother. They can add the rage of those defined as especially deprived to their own power and craft a weapon with immense capacity for devastation.

- 3) Celebrate and continually represent to ourselves this mental construct as a way of maintaining our sense of its validity. We must act in accordance with it and demand that others do so as well. Nothing concrete will ever be accomplished in this way, but that does not matter. The concrete is just the father's shtick, and we have deconstructed that. Our political processes here are their own objective. In a very important sense, they give us the only sense of our reality that we have got or can get.

- 4) Love the mother and have faith that, unencumbered by the father, she will make our lives perfect and ensure that we are touched by nothing but love. This is a proposition that appears only implicitly. It is quite unconscious. But it constitutes our guarantee that we can accomplish our tasks of destruction with impunity. We need not worry about destroying the social order. Everything will be fine.

All of this bring us back to Oberlin College.

Oberlin College Redefined

Consider the plight of Oberlin College. The charge against Krislov was that he had not responded immediately to the black student "demand" that the administration shut the campus down. There is no way of understanding this except that he was not supposed to be in the position of making an independent decision; his authority was not recognized.

Authority, which is to say the right to define reality and decide upon the course of events, had been assigned to the black students (See Note 4). The responsibility of other students was to be their allies and to support them in their views and feelings and the demands that followed from them. In their perception, Oberlin had been a scene of oppression, in various forms, most notably in the form of racism. The administration had been complicit in its maintenance, and indeed had been its agent. The response to the racist actions became an attack upon the College itself, seen as racist. This is from Rachel Berkrot (2013):

Oberlin students have not only a right, but an obligation to call bullshit when they see it. We have a history of students fighting the administration for many things; from divestment from South Africa during apartheid, to retaining the Asian American History position in the faculty when it was going to be cut. There have been sit-ins, building takeovers, and a wide variety of creative demonstrations. I mention these only to highlight the fact that historically, change has not happened at this institution because students were polite. For those who were embarrassed by students' actions on CNN, I urge you to reexamine the statement they were making about institutional change by chanting 'no bullshit' on camera. To me it seems that they were recognizing the bullshit within this institution at large and calling it out.

At Oberlin, classes are taught with an almost entirely Eurocentric focus. Most faculty members are white, and students within the classical conservatory are trained to sing and play music like white musicians. These

are just some of the ways in which institutional racism manifests itself at this college. This academic institution perpetuates racism and bias because prejudice is ingrained in its very structure. This is not to say that this is a problem unique to Oberlin. Systemic racism is everywhere. Though the administration is getting credit for it, the reason that Oberlin has received so much attention is because students are choosing to urgently address this issue. Fighting institutional racism comes with a wide spectrum of unique challenges, including the fact that it is an invisible problem for many white people. The protesters in the CNN interview are rising to this challenge and they should be encouraged to do so.

What is being called for here is a redefinition of the college. It has to become an agency for the pursuit of social justice. Within this redefinition, the default way of understanding Marvin Krislov and his administration would be as the father. The redefinition of the college would be against the father and would repudiate his works. The kind of considerations that, in our customary view of reality, would be seen as the proper focus of a college administration, would be, within the redefined college, seen as anathema.

The structure of exchange is the product of the father. As we understand it, any institution must establish a place within it if it is to survive. But in the redefined world, it is identified with the oppression that the students must fight against, which defines them against the administration. This is from an anonymous alumna (2013) commenting on the webcast of the emergency convocation, setting up an opposition between the vitality of the political activists and the deadliness of the administration, not in terms of their persons, but their function:

in my four years at oberlin, we came together many times in the face of hate...

in these crescendos of terror and hurt, we offer up our passion for each other. we bring powerful testimonies, fierce questions, amazingly moving articulations of bravery and strength.

Again:

watching the webcast, i reveled in the words of the students and faculty. i am in awe of their brilliance and deeply moved by their words, still echoing for me. as we moved into the q&a, i longed for more shared stories, more ideas and demands.

But:

when the mics repeatedly passed into the hand of an administrator, i curled

inside myself a little. they do not speak the language of liberatory action. we cannot expect them to. oberlin is a hierarchical institution, woven into the fabric of capitalism. it breathes in the oppression of the wider world....when marvin krislov speaks of needing more money in order to move beyond so-called 'need-sensitive' admissions, what he is saying is that it is not profitable to offer entrance into the institution to those who can't pay. he is stuck, because his obligation to money supercedes any notion of community or generosity.

his position renders him incapable of aiding the fight for liberation. he will never be able to act for the good of those who are marginalized because his job is to act in accordance with the (white supremacist, heteronormative, money-driven) institution.

This rhetoric is typical. I have seen no recognition of the fact that the college needs to have resources supplied to it by the outside world, which ultimately will not do so unless it believes it is getting some from the college, in exchange. Their view assimilates exchange to profit making, which is brought about by the white, greedy father, and could be done without if the father could be gotten rid of. The unconscious premise is that the mother will take care of everything.

In all this, we can see that Krislov, whatever he wanted to do, would have been in no position to introduce objective issues related to the institutions survival. Actually, the matter goes to the core of rational consideration itself:

we are met with fuzzy roundabout words like: 'investigating' 'accountability' 'safety.' our administrators wearing their defensiveness baldly, uncomfortably....

Remember that the drive toward social justice has a focus only in the mind. It consists in hatred of the father and love of the oppressed. The convocation was a setting in which this could be instantiated and the psychic reality it represented brought to life. Krislov could not have transformed the situation by revealing that the racist inundation was a hoax, and that the Ku Klux Klansman was a student in a blanket. If he had stood in the way, he would just have been rolled over.

The provocations needed to be seen as real in order to legitimize the response to them, and the students came alive through the response. Nothing could have been allowed to stand in the way of that. They could therefore borrow the reality they needed from the reality of the response. The motive of their perpetration was

quite irrelevant.

As I have said, there was no external focus of this action. No program driving forward into concrete behavior was planned. The convocation, by itself, was its own meaning. It is useful, therefore, to think of it as a religious display; a setting for the affirmation of a basic faith; a religious recommitment, rather like a Christian revival. For Krislov to have brought up the hoax would have been seen as the equivalent of a satanic act.

The convocation as Christian revival

Students' appreciation of the event clearly showed that it was appreciated for the feelings it evoked, and the fact that it gave them a chance to acknowledge and separate themselves from their sinfulness, and renew their faith and commitment. A widely circulated piece by Ida Hoequist (2013) reports that she went to the convocation because she wanted to listen, but:

I came away from it wanting to make visible my support for places and times like that, where POC are lifted up, where those with white privilege recognize that this fight is also theirs because every fight for human rights belongs to every human, and, further, that our place as white people is, for once, not in the spotlight. This one is not about us.

But since I am privileged enough to have been afforded this space to make my voice heard, I will tell you this: I kept going to the events that were organized in response to what happened last night. I marched around Tappan (but really I danced, because that impromptu jazz marching band was mad good). I went to the convocation. I sat in the Finney balcony, clapping in time to the chants (WE ARE O-BER-LIN and TELL ME WHAT COMMUNITY LOOKS LIKE/THIS IS WHAT COMMUNITY LOOKS LIKE and WE ARE FUCKING ANGRY), wondering why the last time I saw Finney that packed was during my freshman orientation, wondering why we students didn't unite like this far more often. I felt togetherness. I felt that solidity again.

I have been unable to find video evidence of the similarity between the Oberlin convocation and a Christian revival meeting, but there is a video available of a similar event that took place at Bowdoin College, another highly acclaimed and expensive liberal arts college in the US. The motivation for their coming together is about the same, absent the deliberate provocations in the Oberlin case, and the emotional atmosphere, especially in the last two minutes, is what one would expect at a revival: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OPsHMioUtTU>

In all of this, the courage which is a critical component of the students' self-affirmation, because it is the idealization of the self that they affirm. It is central to

the project in which they are engaged and can only be understood as defiance of the ubiquitous racism, the toxicity, whose nature we have been trying to understand, and whose cause we have located here. Without it, they, in their own minds, are nothing.

The vicissitudes of the pristine self

The pristine self enters here in important ways. Its premise drives the whole operation. Given that there is very little overt racism, the little racism that there is must go a long way. The case of Maya Mariner (2013) is illustrative.

She was a black student who had been studying in Italy during her senior year of high school. Hanging out with her Italian friends,

We decided to go down a street where a group of teenage Italian boys, all who were looking straight at me, stood, and even before we started to move I grew nervous. I felt something was going to happen. Maybe they would call us something like “dumb Americans,” or try to hit on us for their own amusement, but I knew something wasn’t right.

I walked slowly and tried to ask my friends to go a different direction but it was too late... we were going through the crowd of boys.

Five seconds after I passed them, I heard “NEGRA!” I turned around and saw the boys smiling. I whipped my head back and walked a few more paces before laughing and saying, “I think they just called me the n-word.”

I was joking, I didn’t know what happened, and I continued throughout the night, trying to not let it affect me. ‘I’m sure they didn’t mean it,’ I told myself, ‘maybe I heard them wrong. “Negra” can be taken in many different ways, it doesn’t have to be bad. You are looking into it way too much.’

But the months passed and it slowly ate away at me. I didn’t want to do anything anymore. I didn’t want to speak Italian, I didn’t want to hang out with Italians. I stopped raising my hand in class. Sometimes I would just sit, cry, and blame myself because if I just went down a different road, none of this would have happened. I was 17, vulnerable in a culture that I didn’t know, speaking a language that was unfamiliar. That slur made me realize that even though I was so open, and always trying to gain the acceptance of white people, I would never be “one of them.”

The second time I was called nigger was here in Oberlin. I was out celebrating with a friend because our birthdays were the same week, and while we were going back to our dorms before crossing the street to the Science Center, a passing car came by and I heard “Nigger” as it rushed away. I finished my ice cream, and tried to smile and play it off, but that feeling came back again. Even here in America, my native country, I still did

not belong.

What is to be noted here is the disproportionate reaction to these two occasions of mild abuse. The fact for example, that the first of them was the only occasion of such abuse while she was in Italy does not seem to have been factored into the despair with which she came to color her whole Italian experience.

What needs to be understood here is the fact that in the experience of the pristine self, postulating a boundariless connection with the world, the unity of the self has its counterpart in the perceived unity of the experienced world. A single insult can translate into the experience of the world as a hateful place.

Consider Ida Hoequist again. She says: " I am cisgender and white and pass for straight, but also I am a queer woman and that means I almost never feel both safe and accepted at the same time." This, from a student at Oberlin, where homosexual women are universally celebrated, can only be asserted on the basis of the most stunning distortion and generalization.

Similar considerations apply to the correlative concept of microaggression. In the absence of substantive (macro) aggression, small slights are going to have to suffice for constructing an image of a toxic environment. But small slights are, by definition, small. How is something large going to come out of them?

The answer is the supposition that they happen all the time, which is taken to imply that they are structural. The author of the blog Oberlin Microaggressions expresses his intent and vision this way:

Our blog is primarily for students who have been marginalized at Oberlin. We welcome submissions by marginalized students who wish to speak about their lived experiences.

If you see or hear racist, heterosexist/homophobic, anti-Semitic, classist, ableist, sexist/cissexist speech etc., please submit it to us so that we may demonstrate that these acts are not simply isolated incidents, but rather part of structural inequalities.

The proposition that microaggressions happen all the time and represent systemic features of American society is common. This is from a February 15 letter to the editor of The Oberlin Review, reacting to the racist efflorescence of February:

We are the Edmonia Lewis Center for Women and Transgender People, and we are writing to condemn the recent trend of hateful

speech attacking marginalized communities on campus. We are acting in solidarity with the Multicultural Resource Center and other student and faculty organizers to address harm caused by racism, queerphobia, anti-Semitism and other forms of structural oppression. The ELC is a collective that is committed to dismantling interconnected systems of oppression based on sex, gender, race, class, sexuality, age, ability, size, religion, nationality, ethnicity and language. We serve as a safe space for programming and conversation. We also respect and advocate for the creation of other safe and supportive spaces on campus. Given our mission statement and commitment to challenging oppression, we are deeply angry and hurt by the recent escalation of anonymous hate speech on campus. While we acknowledge the pain and fear caused by these blatant attacks, we wish to emphasize and bring attention to the microaggressions that individuals face on Oberlin's campus as a part of their daily lives. We must hold each other accountable for condemning visible acts of violence and should think critically about how our daily speech and actions perpetuate these oppressive structures. We acknowledge that these incidents are reflective of power dynamics on campus and are by no means "isolated incidents." While Oberlin is known for its progressive politics and commitment to equality, the incidents of the past week are a part of a long legacy of visible and invisible violence toward marginalized communities.

Part of the meaning behind the claim of universal microaggression is the idea that celebrating the classical Western cultural achievements, which in our analysis are the products of the father, is itself a venue for microaggression and, indeed, of white supremacy. Derald Wing Sue, the theorist of microaggression, put it this way:

Cultural racism is perhaps the most insidious and damaging form of racism because it serves as an overarching umbrella under which individual and institutional racism thrives. It is defined as the individual and institutional expression of the superiority of one group's cultural heritage (arts/crafts, history, traditions, language, and values) over another group's, and the power to impose those standards upon other groups (Sue, 2004).

The problem is that Sue is a bit egregious when it comes to specifying what "over another group's" comes down to. This is his criticism of a Professor Richardson, who was teaching what appears to have been a standard introductory course in psychology.

The Black students in the class suffered a series of racial microaggressions that were unconsciously and unintentionally delivered by Professor Richardson. Rather than thinking he was insulting or invalidating students of color, the professor believed he was teaching the "real" history of psychology, teaching students to think and communicate in an objective fashion, While that might have been his conscious intent, the hidden messages being received by students of color via racial microaggressions were perceived as invalidating and demeaning.

First, the professor seems to not even entertain the notion that the history of psychology and the curriculum comes from a primarily White Eurocentric perspective that alienates and/or fails to capture the experiential reality of students of color (cultural racism).

And he refers to a book that

took psychology to task for being primarily a White Eurocentric field, neglecting the contributions of people of color in historical storytelling, and for unintentionally elevating the contributions of one group (primarily White males), while denigrating Asian, African, and Latin American contributors through "benign neglect." The hidden message to students of color was that American psychology is superior (other psychologies are inferior), that it is universal, and that students of color should accept this "reality." White students are affirmed in this curriculum, but students of color feel that their identities are constantly assailed in the classroom.

What we can see here is what was referred to before as undermining of the achievements of the father, redefining the appreciation of those achievements as an act of theft from others. But what is particularly interesting for our purposes is the logic. It would not matter who the father was. The idea that an achievement may be universal is not present, but what is recognized as an achievement is supposed to be a function of who is recognizing. The purpose of recognition is not the acknowledgment of accomplishment, but the affirmation of identity. We therefore may say that it is the paternal function that is being rejected.

This becomes especially clear when Sue continues:

Second, Professor Richardson seems to equate rational discourse with approaching topics in a calm and objective manner. When he tells the Black student to “calm down” or implies that they are “too emotional,” the Professor may unintentionally be delivering another racial microaggression with multiple hidden fears, assumptions, and biased values: (a) Blacks are prone to emotional outbursts, can get out of control, and may become violent; (b) emotion is antagonistic to reason and conversations should be unemotional and objective in the classroom; and (c) the communication style of many Blacks is dysfunctional and should be discouraged (Sue & Sue, 2008). Pathologizing Black communication and learning styles has been identified as a common microaggression directed toward African Americans

The same line of reasoning would apply to disciplines whose claim to objectivity is a good deal less assailable than that of psychology; physics or the other natural sciences, for example. This claim to objectivity would constitute differentiation between them and the rest of the college. Interestingly, they came under attack for precisely this.

The Student Proposals for Institutional Change

As an outgrowth of the mobilization, a number of student working groups were formed to develop proposals for institutional change. These took their final form in a document submitted in May. For the most part, the students proposed deepening and extending the college's political commitments. They make it clear that the assaults of February and March are to be undifferentiated from the panoply of the father's crimes and transgressions:

This is from the introduction to their Final Proposal
(<http://www.docstoc.com/docs/160524391/Oberlin-Student-Proposals-for-Institutional-Change?>)

We are a coalition of Oberlin College and Conservatory students who have come together in the wake of the past month's hate-based incidents...

We are not just responding to these recent events; we are addressing the history of racism, cissexism, queerphobia, classism, faith-based discrimination, ableism, sizeism, and eurocentrism in the United States and have a more meaningful discourse on the ways they manifest at Oberlin College and Conservatory. We expect the College and Conservatory to promote social change by validating and affirming all students' voices,

especially those whose experiences of exclusion have been marginal to the larger campus discourse.

...We would like to move forward as advocates for more resources for ... the inclusion of a social justice framework in all academic coursework; student participation in administrative initiatives; a re-evaluation of faculty, staff, and administrative hiring practices to better promote meaningful and sustainable diversity; and situating our education within the scope of a larger social context.

As I have said, the natural sciences, whose commitment to the importance of objectivity would have made them a last bastion, were brought under attack for their separateness:

We are disappointed by the Natural Science division's general lack of response to recent hate-based incidents. Physical isolation and racial homogeneity of the Natural Sciences result in an inaccessible community with a limited relationship to other academic departments. Every academic discipline has equal opportunity to identify truths; we must employ this framework to dismantle academic hierarchies.

The specific programmatic remedies include:

Natural Sciences

Hold a mandatory forum moderated by Oberlin College Dialogue Center to discuss all different aspects of diversity and how they operate in the Natural Sciences....

Offer mini-courses that specifically address particular issues of identity and power in the sciences. Modify existing courses to include critical thinking on social issues related to science....

As for the rest, among the key agenda items were mandatory "re-orientation" workshops for students, faculty and staff led by paid student trainers

In considering potential trainings and workshops, the largest of the working groups narrowed their focus into three main topics: new students and First-Years; continuing privilege and oppression education, or, "re-orientation"; and mandatory training for faculty and staff. Student leadership and facilitation are central to the success of these programs, so we would require a sustainable training system and compensation for these students.

The administration welcomed these proposals and quickly implemented all that it could, making it clear that, as far as was manageable, the rest would be on its

continuing agenda.

Summing up the matter, Jacobson (2013b) said:

Long before the racism hoax in February 2013, Oberlin was a campus heavy with multi-cultural, identity and “social justice” ideologies dominating campus life.

The demands arising out of the bias incidents, encouraged and accepted by the Oberlin administration, pushed that agenda deeper into every aspect of the campus, touching almost every student. While the activists did not get everything they wanted, they got a lot and most important, have regained the momentum they felt they had lost prior to the hoax.

Conclusion

We began with the question of the meaning of the charge that racism is pervasive and turned to Oberlin because, in a well documented incident, the racism it found so threatening had been manufactured. We noted that the college administration knew it had been manufactured, but allowed the mobilization against it to continue. We asked why the administration did not take the role of authority and provide a reality check.

The answer I have proposed was that reality had been redefined at Oberlin and that, within that redefinition, the charge of racism was, in effect, structural, and had come to provide the meaning of people's college experience and, indeed, of their lives. The fact that the racism had been manufactured in this instance was of no moment. What is more, the structure as it had been redefined was directed against the form of structure within which the administration had authority. The administration had no choice but to go along with the hoax. The hoax represented a deeper truth, within this reality, than anything conferred by the administration's formal position.

But in concentrating on this single incident, we are, in effect, looking at a snapshot, more properly at what amounts to a freeze-frame in an ongoing movie. For the reality at Oberlin is a moving reality. It is defined as progress toward a goal: social justice or whatever one wants to call it. It is precisely because the goal is not only in the future, but defines the future, that relegates objective considerations to secondary importance.

As we have seen, the terms of reference for Oberlin's reality exist only in the mind, and therefore the motion toward the goal of social justice must be continually reenacted in order to perform its function of structuring people's lives.

Progress in this instance consists in strengthening this way of seeing things in people's minds. This is why progress at Oberlin was defined in terms of increasing the pervasiveness of social justice thematics in all aspects of the College. But this is inseparable from the widening and strengthening of illusion, which had become, in effect, the meaning of the College..

So the question of why the administration went along with the hoax has a deeper answer. It is that the College had, by this point, become itself a hoax, and had dedicated itself to the mission of further hoaxing. In not revealing what they knew about the origin of the racist material, therefore, Krislov and his administration were just doing their job.

But we should not leave without bringing up the question of what is at issue here, and we can do that by referring to a familiar trope that is commonplace among the partisans of social justice. They say that it is a matter of privilege that whites do not have to concern themselves with issues of race; indeed it is a manifestation of their racism.

But another way to look at it is to say that the greatest accomplishment of Western civilization has been the development of objective self-consciousness to the point where it is truly universal and where the tribalisms of race have been left behind. In large measure, we can maneuver in that world, on an equal footing, by accepting its universalistic terms, precisely because we are reasonably confident that others will accept them as well. To the extent that any group cannot so maneuver, the doctrine of objectivity provides us with universalistic ways of correcting such a lapse from principle.

But this is exactly what is under attack. And those who have brought it under attack should consider what, in its absence, the alternative can be except for a bottomless pit of ever-increasing toxicity.

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1 What follows has been widely reported. Comprehensive accounts, from a variety of perspectives, include Perez-Pena and Gabriel, (2013); Sheeran, (2013), Dicken (2013), and Boeglin & Herbst (2013)

2 A formidable force through several iterations, the Klan has ceased to be a major presence in American society. Today it exists more as a bogey-man than a real threat. The Southern Poverty Law Center says:

Since the 1970s the Klan has been greatly weakened by internal conflicts, court cases, a seemingly endless series of splits and government infiltration. While some factions have preserved an openly racist and militant approach, others have tried to enter the mainstream, cloaking their racism as mere "civil rights for whites." Today, the Center estimates that there are between 5,000 and 8,000 Klan members, split among dozens of different - and often warring - organizations that use the Klan name.

For a view of where the Klan stands in contemporary American society, check out this video taken at a Klan demonstration and counter-demonstration at the football game between the University of Mississippi and Louisiana State University in 2009: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ezkvRywf4vw>

3 The full interview is here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6rMP4NJHmZE>

4 This was clearly the dominant view held by the black Oberlin students, but whether it was unanimous is impossible for me to say. I have seen no evidence of any contrary view, but of course my access to the relevant data is quite limited. An analysis of the relation of black students to this role, and it is certainly a role, would be of great interest, but it will have to wait for another occasion.