

## HARVARD, SEXUAL POLITICS, CLASS AND RESISTANCE

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As we write, the case of alleged sexual harassment by John Comaroff, a professor of anthropology at Harvard, is exploding. The Harvard case is particularly egregious, not least because of the elite status of the university.

In this piece we treat the Harvard case as part of a much wider set of problems concerning class, sexual politics, inequality and resistance. Our focus initially is on universities in the United States. But we need to remember that academic enterprise today is utterly international. Everywhere the industry relies on similar economic models, has similar intellectual concerns and fosters the considerable mobility of professionals and students from workplace to workplace around the globe.

We are particularly addressing anthropology and other graduate students in the United States and across the world. Our aim is to try to answer some of the difficult questions that come up again and again in online discussion of the case.

First: Why did Caroline Elkins, who wrote such an important book about the brutal suppression of Mau Mau in Kenya, sign the dreadful Harvard letter? And why did so many other people whose work you admire sign letters like the Harvard one?

The second question is one people seem to avoid asking directly, but it is behind so much of what is being said. At Harvard, and with other abuse cases, a strange fact stands out. Most men are not abusers. But almost all male managers cover up and enable abuse. And so do almost all female managers. Why? What is going on here?

Third: The people who write the open letters, and others who want to defend abusers, go on about due process. But due process works as a Catch-22. Why should well-educated men accused of sexual harassment be the only ones to enjoy due process, when the apologists know full well that is exactly what we want for the victims of sexual abuse? Instead of banging on about due process for abusers only, shouldn't we all be asking how can to build a genuinely fair process for everyone?

Fourth: Harvard, Columbia, and other universities in the United States and across the world go to extraordinary lengths to cover up abuse, protect abusers and thus enable further abuse. They do so even when most of the people who run those institutions don't abuse. Why? Why does this matter so much to them?

Fifth, and finally, how can we do good work in the toxic environment of these institutions? Or to put it positively: what can we take from the struggles against sexual violence at Columbia and Harvard to help us do good, creative intellectual work as scholars and teachers?

### **Starting Out**

Fundamental to our answers here is an argument about class, gender, inequality and resistance which holds good across the board. We have set out this argument in more detail elsewhere. In brief, what we see is that gendered inequality is held in place by misogyny, sexualized threats, sometimes rape and more. That gendered inequality stands for, and distracts us from, class inequality. It also makes every other kind of inequality seem natural, God-given and not to be challenged.

Moreover, whenever you see a 'scandal' exposed, this is almost always because of the pressure brought to bear by informal

organizations of survivors, fellow workers, sympathizers and friends. Often the brave collective workplace organisations have been circumspect, if not clandestine and desperate. Increasingly, however, people have been learning to work through unions to protect themselves and get results in the face of workplace managers and university administrations determined to hide bullying and sexual violence.

### **The Harvard Case in Brief**

Before we go any further, we need a short explanation of the Harvard case. The best way to understand all the details of what happened is to read [the case file written by the lawyers for the three women involved.](#)<sup>[1]</sup>

John Comaroff is a distinguished anthropologist of Southern Africa. Throughout his career he has worked closely with his wife, Jean Comaroff. They are important scholars of religion, colonialism and postcolonial society, and are seen as scholars on the left. They come from South Africa, were trained in Britain at the LSE, and taught for many years at the University of Chicago.

In 2012 Harvard hired both of them from Chicago. Administrators at Harvard were aware of John's reputation for sexual harassment at Chicago, but his scholarly standing was more important.

From 2018 on, three graduate students in anthropology, Margaret Czerwieski, Lilia Kilburn and Amulya Mandava tried to complain about Comaroff's behaviour to the Harvard administration through the appropriate channels. They were blocked at every turn, and Comaroff told each of them that if they did not stop, he would destroy their careers. They knew he could and believed he would.

Three of the people in the Harvard administration, who were among those blocking the case, eventually told Czerwieski, Kilburn and Mandava privately that the only way they could get justice was to go the press. In 2020 the three went to the student newspaper, *The Harvard Crimson*. Precisely because it was a student paper, it was prepared to print truth.

The ensuing scandal provoked a university inquiry into three professors in the department. Two of them, both former heads of department, were fired outright. John Comaroff was found to have used inappropriate language. He was given a slap on the wrist, and not allowed to supervise graduate students for a year.

Jean Comaroff then organised an open letter of support for her husband, which was signed by 38 senior professors at Harvard. This letter said that Comaroff's right to free speech had been compromised, that Harvard had violated due process, and it implied he had done nothing wrong. This was rapidly followed by a second, similar, open letter, signed by professors at other universities. [\[2\]](#)

Many, many graduate students at Harvard were upset by that letter. They saw it as a betrayal by teachers they respected, but also as a threat if they did not fall into line. The situation also rang many bells for graduate students and younger teachers across the United States, and in other countries.

Fifty Harvard teachers, including Vincent Brown and Walter Johnson, released a counter letter in support of the students. Later the same day came the bombshell. [\[3\]](#)

Czerwieski, Kilburn and Mandava had lawyers, and those lawyers were suing Harvard for refusing to deal properly with their complaints for so long. The lawyers released the case file, the document they had just filed with the court. The file was 65 pages long, very clear and well written. [\[4\]](#)

They were suing Harvard for the cover up, not Comaroff. The last 20 pages listed the ten counts on which they were suing. But 45 pages told the story of what Comaroff had done, from the point of view of the three women. It is clear that they had been taking notes all the way through. (One lesson is that, if you are being harassed, and may want justice later, always take notes every step of the way.)

Those first 45 pages demolished the case for Comaroff, detailing what he had actually done. We do not have space for the details here. Suffice it to say that the file details a pattern of harassment, relentless threats to wreck careers and sexual assault.

However, we must make an important legal point here. The case file is only a document filed by one party in a civil case. It is legally appropriate, in the United States, to discuss such a document. There is no criminal case. It would be a mistake, however, to automatically assume that every assertion and every description in the case file is accurate.

That said, we believe the account the lawyers have written. More important, as far as we can see almost everyone who has read it believes it too. Within hours, 34 of the 38 professors who had signed the first letter issued a joint retraction. Their retraction was what we in the hypocrisy community call a non-apology apology. But it was clear enough who they now believed, and who they knew their students and colleagues now believed.

The legal case against Harvard is important. But we should also note that bringing the case and posting the case file was much the best way that Czerwieski, Kilburn, Mandava and their lawyers could bring the details of the whole case into the open. Just as when they went to the *Crimson*, this example shows the importance of fighting any case of sexual harassment in public.

## Signing Letters

Our first question is - Why did Caroline Elkins sign that letter in defence of John Comaroff? She wrote such an impressive book about violent response of the British colonists in Kenya to the Mau Mau revolt for land and national independence. In that book she is so very honest about racial, gendered and class cruelty.

Jamaica Kincaid signed that letter too. Jamaica Kincaid! Jamaica Kincaid, whose work, from *Annie John* on we have read with awe. And Ann Laura Stoler, whose *Race and the Education of Desire* has had a near biblical status in our household, also signed another open letter from faculty outside Harvard in defence of Comaroff.

And of course, they are not the only ones.

## Raya Sarkar and the Indian List

Immediately after the exposure of Harvey Weinstein in 2017, Raya Sarkar, a 23-year-old law student at the University of California Davis, sat down to write a list. Her action was 'unplanned'. She said later that she was just angry.

Sarker posted her 'List of Sexual Harassers in Academia' on Facebook. The men on the list were mostly professors and lecturers in India, although a few were Indians working in the US and other countries. There were seventy-five names on the list, from thirty institutions. Jadavpur University in Calcutta was top of the list, with ten names, and Delhi was second with nine. [\[5\]](#)

Sarkar was of Indian ancestry and had studied in Delhi. But she hoped that her Singapore passport and US residence would protect her from retaliation.

There was outrage in the Indian academic world. Fourteen leading academic women issued a joint statement on the respected

feminist website *Kafila*, calling on Sarkar to take down her list. They said they had been fighting for feminism for years, but this was quite the wrong way to go about it, smearing people on social media. They called for fairness and due process.[\[6\]](#)

Sarkar replied that she had researched every name, talked to the women making the allegations themselves, in person, by phone and email, often in great detail. They, understandably, did not want their names used. Sarkar said also that the main reason she put out her list was so that students would have some idea of which teachers to avoid.

Part of the problem was that many of the men on that list were Marxists, or men who had done good work on gender and literary theory. Who would have thought it?

Moreover, although Sarkar did not say this, the women of *Kafila* should have, and could have, insisted on due process. That would mean each of the institutions named by Sarkar beginning a formal inquiry. They could ask any accusers to come forward, with honest assurances that whistle blowers would not be victimized. Then any allegations could be examined as transparently in possible.

One year after Sarkar's list was published, the journalist Piyasree Dasgupta wrote to twenty-three of the thirty institutions that Sarkar had named. Two institutions wrote back to say that they had indeed initiated an inquiry and the allegations had been unfounded. The other twenty-one did not reply, because, having done nothing at all, what could they say?[\[7\]](#)

Everyone in India also noticed, immediately, that Sarkar was a Dalit, or at least a Bahujan of low caste. And the women disdaining her were almost all Brahmins, with a few of other high castes. Dalit women in the universities, in particular, understood the attacks on Sarkar as motivated by caste, and many strongly sympathised with her. The Brahmin feminists were outraged when

the Dalit feminists said this - because it was both true and shameful. And we should not forget how tightly sexual abuse is tied up with caste in India.[\[8\]](#)

There is nothing especially Indian about all this. Interviewed a year later for an Indian website, Sarkar pointed out that that Donna Haraway, Judith Butler, Gayatri Spivak and Slavoj Žižek had all recently defended professors facing allegations of abuse.[\[9\]](#)

The details of what Haraway, Butler and Spivak said and did, and did not say and do, are complex. For the full story of Haraway and the Santa Cruz case in 2017, there is a good long read from *Buzzfeed*. And the blog post by the four brave women there who finally came forward and got Gopal Balakrishnan fired is essential reading.[\[10\]](#)

There is a solid article from the *New York Times* about the letter Butler wrote in 2018, and Spivak and Žižek signed, in defence of Avita Ronell at New York University. But for a full account of the politics and context, you need the long read by Pauline Park on her blog.[\[11\]](#)

Until yesterday, Haraway and Spivak would be on most people's list of the ten most influential scholars in gender studies in North America. Butler would probably be top of the list. So what was going on with those three, with the women from *Kafila*, and those women who signed the Harvard letter? The answer is complex. But here is part of it.

### **The Experience of Complicity**

To explain the actions of senior feminists and radicals who are complicit with the coverups, and who sign the open letters in support of colleagues accused of abuse, let us start with the working life of a moderately successful feminist academic who began teaching in a university between 1975 and 2000.

Success carries with it departmental responsibilities, graduate supervisions, maybe a job as undergraduate tutor or department chair. And if you are any good at what you do, there will be younger women, graduate students, who turn to you for advice when they are in difficulties. Particularly if they are being harassed by your colleagues.

So there you are, in your office, with a young woman telling you what she is scared to tell almost anyone. She is in floods of tears. Maybe some predator has chased her around the room. Maybe he didn't chase her, but can't stop brushing against her, stroking her hand, asking her out. Maybe she is deeply ashamed because she did sleep with him to get ahead.

Or maybe her thesis advisor told her he loved her, and then his wife found out and made him dump her. Now he will no longer supervise her, expects her to go away, and she can't go to his seminar without bursting into tears in public. She is pretty sure she is going to fail the course.

You look at that young woman, and here is what you know. You can go public, confront your colleague, and battle it out for the student's sake. If you do so, she will be punished and her career will be over. So, probably, will yours.

So you hold her hand, you offer her tissues. You say you don't know what to do. You suggest she get a transfer. You hate the man she is talking about. You can barely look at him when you pass in the corridor, which you have to do every day. You know he can see what you feel on your face, and you know your career is likely to suffer because of it.

So you go along to get along, because it is what everyone does. Fear is how the system works. That fear is not a weakness. It's survival. Occasionally you see or hear about someone who fights back and is crushed.

This is 1990 or 2000, not 2022.

By 2022, you are a distinguished professor, in your 50s and 60s, you have accumulated memories of silences. Those memories are mortifying. And probably, you were not just complicit in your silence. Probably you actually made a decision to ignore or deny abuse, or you were delegated to tell the young woman that such a decision had been made.

For every predator, there are several people who have to clean up.[\[12\]](#)

And it's not just sex. The same complex networks of bullying have structured your career, and the careers of those around you. Every department in a university has at least one teacher who has been intellectually bullied so systematically they can no longer write, and everyone pities their disappearing career.

And of course, if you are moderately successful, you too have been the intellectual bully, a little bit, maybe. Well, actually, probably a lot more than you were willing to admit to yourself. And if you are a feminist, a Marxist, a whateverist, maybe your intellectual bullying was fueled by political conviction. Maybe you really believe that the people who disagree with you are stupid.

You have failed people. You have been the instrument of the end of someone's career.

Do that for thirty or forty years, and complicity seeps into your soul. You try to resist. But also, sometimes, you feel other people should roll with the punches. You can hate the people whose example pushes you to take risks you never previously dared to take. Especially if you had wanted to take risks. Especially if you are ashamed of not having taken them.

For many people, it's better not to wallow in that mess. It's better to feel entitled, and say to each other, 'Well, that is just how John - or Tom, Dick or Harry - is,' and laugh unkindly.

Then some self-righteous young woman or man starts writing obscenities on bathroom walls, pushing vigilante leaflets under

doors at night, and bursts through all your boundaries. And you have to confront your complicity, your humiliation, the small abuses you put up with, your own silences, your rage and fear.

So maybe you sign a letter or write something in the email chain. We understand. We really do. We are in our seventies. No one of our generation has come through all those decades that clean. We too have our silences and our mortifications.

That's also why we are so pitifully grateful to all the angry young people who are blowing up the old fortress of fear. Thank you, for the revenge, for the courage, for the truth. You give us joy.

### **Harvard Archaeology and Anthropology**

That is part of the answer to why people sign letters. There are also more malign motives. See, for example, Paula Chakravartty's [brave and detailed post](#) about her colleague Arjun Appadurai, one of the signatories of the letter by academics from outside Harvard.

But now we have to add some detail about the anthropology department at Harvard and other Ivy League universities. And we have to pick up the pace here, or this article will go on for ever. We are tempted to tell you stories about the Harvard department. But luckily Becky Cooper published a very good book two years ago which does that job: *We Keep the Dead Close: A Murder at Harvard and a Half Century of Silence*.

Cooper has written a true crime book about Jane Britton, a 23-year-old graduate student in anthropology at Harvard who was beaten to death in 1969. Rumour had it she was having an affair with a professor and he killed her. Maybe, Cooper concluded after years of research, but probably not. Cooper did try every way she could to solve the crime. She found several men who might have

done it. In the process, she turned over stones which reveal decade after decade of sexual impunity in that department. And a lot of common or garden misogyny.

We recommend the book. It's an engrossing book, a page turner, and it left both of us shaking with anger.

And then there is Andean archaeology.

Harvard launched a formal investigation of not just one anthropologist, John Comaroff, but three. The other two were rapidly fired. Between them, they had been the head of anthropology department for eleven of the last fourteen years. One of them, Gary Urton, was fired when twenty-five members of his department wrote to him requesting his resignation.[\[13\]](#)

Gary Urton specialized in Andean archaeology. The ugly story of the culture of archaeologists from the United States digging in the Andes has been told by Mary Leighton in an excellent 2020 article published in the *American Anthropologist* on 'Myths of Meritocracy, Friendship, and Fun Work: Class and Gender in North American Academic Communities'.

Leighton did field research among archaeologists digging in Chile and Peru. Hers is a rich ethnography, with a layered argument. But her main points can be simply stated. Graduate students in archaeology from the United States built careers by joining tenured teachers in rounds of drunken parties at excavations and conferences. The ability to party hard and work hard was valued by everyone. All levels of staff, except for the Latin Americans, were friends, and it was a career open on merit. But the only women with the social skills to navigate those parties were the same women whose class background had taught them how to deal with fraternity brothers - and who never blew a whistle.

This professional culture excluded archaeologists who actually came from Chile and Peru.

Not on purpose. Of course not.

It was just that they did not know how to navigate those parties. They mostly did not want to either, and many found that culture repulsive. The women among them probably also thought it was dangerous, and for women of colour such parties are particularly risky.

Reading Leighton's meticulous work, you can also see why it is so maddening doing research on prehistory and trying to fight your way out from under the gender biases. And we feel also real disgust at the moral vacuum, arrogance and sheer care-less-ness revealed by these stories. Certainly, no foundational ethic, no Hippocratic Oath to 'Do no harm', guided these professionals' practice.

Here's a joke we saw on Twitter. How many Harvard professors does it take to change a lightbulb? 38, because 34 of them will stop helping as soon as they understand how power works.

### **Fraternity Rape in the Ivy League**

There is a broader context for sexual violence at Harvard. This is the long-standing institutional support for cover-ups of assault and rape by rich students at all the Ivy League universities.

Nancy taught anthropology and gender at Dartmouth, the Ivy League college in New Hampshire, for nine months in 1999. Back then her women students told her about rape in the basements of the fraternity houses where some of the 'brothers' came from very rich families. When women complained, the university management did nothing.

Thirteen years later little seemed to have changed. In 2012 some students joined Occupy Dartmouth protests. In 2013 some of those students formed a new group, Real Talk Dartmouth. In April

there was a welcome meeting for several hundred prospective students and their parents. ‘Fifteen members of ... Real Talk Dartmouth ... marched through the room. They chanted “Dartmouth has a problem!” ... and described incidents of homophobia, racism and sexual assault.’[\[14\]](#)

The protest was reported in national media. The college administration reacted by cancelling classes for a day, saying that some students hostile to the protesters had said unacceptably sexist things on social media. The administration said that this could not be tolerated on campus, and the day would be used for a civilised discussion of the problem.

The administration was redefining the problem as bad words, not rape. This is a standard management ploy in America, and it often works. As one Dartmouth student wrote,

‘We are mired in demands for “constructive criticism and dialogue”. ... Set up a panel, schedule a meeting, use the time to schedule the next meeting, and on and on. ... In reality, this means that undesirable changes can be avoided by directing their advocates into endless cycles of nonsense.’[\[15\]](#)

Punishing rape would have caused scandal, and that scandal would have diminished the reputation of the college and the financial contributions on which it depended. The next month, once things were quieter, the management of Dartmouth moved to expel ten of the student protestors.[\[16\]](#)

There were protests at many other elite colleges too. At Brown, in Rhode Island, Lena Sclove was raped and complained to the university. Her rapist was briefly excluded from the college, and then allowed to return. Sclove called a public rally at the entrance to the campus.[\[17\]](#)

At Columbia, in New York, students wore white ribbons in their mortar boards at graduation to protest the rape culture on campus. That same year art student Emma Sulkowicz was raped

and Columbia refused to act. She did an art project in protest. For a year, whenever she left her dormitory room she carried her mattress with her to class, the library, the canteen or wherever. Soon many students understood what she was doing, and whenever she appeared, several would rush to carry the mattress for her. Inspired by Sulkowitz, students organised mattress demonstrations on 130 campuses in October 2014, including Dartmouth.[\[18\]](#)

The problem at the Ivy League and other colleges was not confusion about consent, or a student rape culture, or flawed disciplinary processes. It was that the standard university policy was to do nothing to discipline rapists. This is particularly important at elite private universities, because they depend so heavily on endowments and gifts from alumni and the parents of students.

The abuse is in large part organised through drunken parties at fraternities. That's why women at Dartmouth warned each other about the basements. These are residential clubs for affluent students. If fraternity members were penalised for rape at these parties, it would reflect on and anger their fraternity brothers, their parents, and alumni who attended that fraternity. This class and financial power is the reason rape is tolerated.

As Anne McClintock has put it, 'Why do administrations protect the rights of the accused? ... Administrators seek to protect their brands. No university wants to be branding the Free Rape Campus of America'.[\[19\]](#)

And of course, it is mostly vulnerable women who are raped. Women with close connections or kinship to the rich and powerful are at much less risk. Women trying to move upwards in class terms are far less safe. Fraternity predators are not stupid.[\[20\]](#)

This systematic tolerance of undergraduate rape and assault takes its toll on the administrators who must enforce it. Their processes for dealing with sexual harassment of graduate students

by professors are already sullied by the way they treat undergraduates who should be easier to control.

In short, the whole situation was primed to explode.

### **Managers and Social Class**

So far we have a partial answer to why senior scholars collude. We shall come back to this question again, but first, it will help to look at another, related, question.

Most men are not abusers. But most managers, men and women, cover up and thus enable abuse. Why?

This problem is bigger than just universities. It's true of almost all cases of sexual harassment and sexual violence at work, in churches and children's homes. And the criminal justice systems in almost every country fail to prosecute most complaints of sexual violence. Women police and women prosecutors are party to that. Why?

To begin to answer that question, we have to talk about class. However, what we mean by class may not be quite what you expect.

We understand class as a relationship. So, for example, many people say that the women Weinstein abused and threatened, the women who brought him down, were all rich white celebrities. Well, some of them were, and some of them weren't. But all of them were people who worked for him or wanted a job from him. And all the actors had a union card from the Screen Actors Guild.

The example of Gwyneth Paltrow illustrates this. If you read the book by Jodi Kantor and Megan Twohey of *The New York Times*, you will see that Paltrow was too afraid to come forward publicly herself. But she worked relentlessly to contact other women and bring them to the reporters. She was organising resistance.[\[21\]](#)

Paltrow also owned a medium size corporation. There she was a CEO. But in the world of film, in Hollywood, Weinstein was her boss, and she was his employee. She worked for him.

Or let us take an example from Harvard. There is a moment in the case file by the lawyers for Czerwienski, Kilburn and Mandava. It is told from Kilburn's point of view. Comaroff is several months into his pursuit of Kilburn. He invites her to his house, and she feels she has to go. He corners her, hugs her forcibly and kisses her. She steps back, looking down. And then she looks up and sees his smile.

We know that smile. So do you.

That smile is a moment when class power is enacted and made real. It is the moment when the class relationship between Comaroff and Kilburn, and his relative power and her powerlessness, becomes utterly clear. In that moment she knows he controls her livelihood as a student teacher, and that he can probably also control her future livelihood in the university system.

That smile is also a moment in a gendered relationship. It is sexual politics and class politics both.

But class is never a relationship between two people. It's always a relationship between wider groups of people. It is the relationship between student teachers and the university administration. Or between hospital workers and their management. And it is a relationship, on one side, between all of us, the 99%, who sell our labour for wages to live, and the 1%, the people who own companies and manage us, on the other.

Understood in this way, class is not a status. It is not your background or identity, nor your cultural style. Class relationships are shared relationships between those of us who have common cause to resist, and others who would exploit and oppress us.

Yet class relationships are neither rigid, nor categorical, but complex and nuanced, and they are subject to change over time and place. There are class relationships within families, in work places at every level, and of course, they define the character of institutional hierarchies.

Class relationships are also situational, but class positions are rarely chosen. To a greater or lesser degree, they are imposed. Nor does it matter that much whether you understand your class position. You still have to do what you are told.

There is another thing about class relationships. There is always a balance of power between classes, a balance of forces. That balance goes back and forth over time. That movement is not just a result of formal class struggles such as those between a union and the management. The balance of forces is actually the result of what happens every day, between sexist or bullying comments and small gestures of defiance, between being ground down day after day, over years, and a shift in confidence and power, and a chance for resistance to make a difference.

These informal struggles never stop. And they produce a balance of power at any moment, in one hospital, on one construction site, across an industry, across a country and in university departments and across the educational sector as a whole.

Comaroff's smile when Kilburn looked up? He was marking a shift in the balance of power. That is why she was scared.

### **Neoliberalism**

The smile Comaroff bestowed on Kilburn was a moment in the relationship between a worker and her manager. It was also a result of a long-term restructuring of university work during the neoliberal era in the United States, and in university work globally. That restructuring had shifted the balance of power against graduate students, just as it had shifted the balance of class power against most workers around the world. [\[22\]](#)

In many large universities in North America much of the teaching is done by graduate students on low stipends. Other teaching at universities and colleges is done by 'adjuncts'. These are teachers without permanent positions or health benefits, paid

perhaps \$4,000 per semester per course, although rates vary widely. Average annual income is probably around \$20,000 to \$25,000. They have no security, and often do not know where or what they will be teaching until the semester begins. In Celine-Marie Pascale's words, they are among the working poor and living on the edge.[\[23\]](#)

It is very difficult for adjuncts to make a steady living at anything close to the income level they had hoped for with their education. But in many cases, they hang on for years, partly because they love scholarship, partly because they have invested so much in their view of themselves as scholars, and partly in the hope that they will be one of the lucky few who get a permanent job.

There is controversy about what proportion of teaching is done by adjuncts, and we would caution against believing the first set of statistics you read. But there is no doubt the practice is common. One consequence is that there are only a small number of full-time 'tenure-track' jobs on offer in American colleges and universities in any year. For many of those jobs, there are hundreds of applications. Realistically, most people coming out of the elite graduate schools will not get one of those jobs.

But equally, the people who do get those jobs will mostly be people with PhDs from a small number of those same elite graduate schools. Harvard ranks towards the top of that tree. This explains why the graduate students in the Comaroff case were so desperate about recommendations and future employment.

The precarity of college teachers in general also increases the relative power of all the networks of elite professors, like the one Comaroff was part of. The economic situation makes harassment and abuse much easier. But it also makes every other kind of oppression easier.

The lesson here is the same as for the tolerance of fraternity rape: follow the money.

### **Why Employers Support Abusers - II**

Let us circle back again to this key question. For God's sake, why do corporations and universities go to such lengths to protect and thus enable abusers? Really, why?

It is a long story and we have offered a detailed economic argument elsewhere. But the bottom line is employers everywhere need managers to push workers so they can make a profit. In the era of neoliberalism, it is important to employers to squeeze workers even more. The way to do that is to bully them, to ignore health and safety regulations, and to yell at them. Above all, the way to do it is to keep your workforce frightened and treat them unfairly.[\[24\]](#)

If an employer wants managers to do that, the employer has to back up the managers. They have to believe the managers over the workers.

It's a bit like the police. Most police officers are not necessarily brutal. But the chief of police and the mayor have to back up the brutal cops, because the other cops want them to. If you send someone out on the streets to bully and control people, they have to know someone has their back.

Moreover, any disciplining of a manager, any firing of a predatory professor, tips the balance of class power a little bit. It makes the student workers feel a bit stronger.

That's one suggestion. Another reason we suggest has to do with the fundamental character of class society.

### **The Balance of Class Forces**

Economic systems change, and that means the balance of power changes too. 2008 was a blow to the financial system.

Though Obama and other leaders printed vast quantities of money to bail out the banks, everyone learned from the crash how fragile and parlous the economy is. And other kinds of events have angered ordinary people and worked to change the balance of power.

In 2012 there were the revelations of the scale of sexism, harassment and rape in the American military. The world also saw the enormous angry demonstrations that followed the horrific gang rape and murder of Jyoti Singh in Delhi.

The huge Women's March in Washington in January 2017 protesting Trump's pussy-grabbing presidency was another extraordinarily important watershed. And MeToo followed Weinstein's fall that autumn. With Black Lives Matter, the protests grew and merged. The Covid epidemic and looming climate chaos have played their role, as has the rise of the racist right, and great class divide between those who are secure and those living on the edge.

And yet there is another side to this story. We argue that in class societies everywhere, throughout history, when an economic system, or important parts of an economy change, ruling classes respond with great ferocity to keep themselves in power. Violence is invariably an aspect of their response, but they also work quickly to change the systems of ideas which justify their privilege and keep the rest of us in thrall. [\[25\]](#)

In particular, when threatened, a ruling class will also move to reconfigure ideologies of gender and lived gender relations to naturalize new forms of inequality in the new settings.

For example, the attacks on Title IX by conservatives and in Laura Kipnis's scurrilous book, are carefully documented by Anne McClintock in her *Jacobin* piece of 2017. [\[26\]](#)

A second and near perfect example of how the ruling classes double down in the face of serious resistance is the nomination and

appointment of Brett Kavanaugh, the Yale frat boy, to the Supreme Court in the face of Christine Blasey Ford's allegations of sexual assault. Indeed, in the battles over Supreme Court appointments, we see exactly how the ruling class manages the ideological climate, often through fierce debates which focus on issues of gender. Consider the long struggle for abortion rights and the dire consequences for those rights under a conservative court.[\[27\]](#)

Because the material world is constantly changing and with it the global political economy, the balance of class forces and gender relations is never fixed.

Our third example - the end of the proxy oil war in Afghanistan - has a different valence. The Americans lost the war in Afghanistan, a war supposedly fought to 'save Afghan women', and this has greatly weakened the economic and political standing of the United States in the world. The bathos of military defeat by 'towel-headed' men in sandals, and the farce ending the occupation, left President Biden quite helpless in the face of Putin's macho style of aggressing in his military onslaught on the Ukraine. Nor has it done much for the masculinist style of predatory American men either.[\[28\]](#)

### **Let's Have Another Think About Weinstein and the Process of Covering Up Abuse.**

Harvey Weinstein's exposure in in 2017 was important for several reasons. He was a major corporate executive, the joint head of a medium-sized Hollywood studio. Not only did he lose his job almost immediately, but his whole corporation suddenly lost all their business. The shareholders faced corporate death. That immediately changed how companies in many industries - not all - reacted to such accusations in future.

Previously the corporations had done everything they could to frighten, smear or pay off accusers. This was institutionalised. Lawyers for employers and rich men routinely got women and men to sign ‘gagging clauses’. These clauses specified that in return for cash they promised not to talk in public about what had been done to them. This was not some odd, or shady, practice. It was something that all corporations did, and in which all large law firms with corporate clients were regularly involved.

Weinstein was a powerful man, with many links to power. The three most important sources of funds for the Democratic Party are Wall Street on the east coast, and Hollywood and Silicon Valley on the west coast. Weinstein was the leading fundraiser for the party in Hollywood. This gave him close relations to Hilary Clinton and to Obama.

According to Megan Twohey, Jodi Kantor and their colleagues in *The New York Times*:

“I know the president of the United States. Who you do know?” Mr. Weinstein, a Democratic fund-raiser, would say during the years Barack Obama was in the White House, adding expletives. “I’m Harvey Weinstein.” “You know what I can do.”

Weinstein was also in the habit of saying ‘One phone call and you’re done.’ And ‘I have eyes and ears everywhere.’ [\[29\]](#)

The industry backed up Weinstein. He routinely set up auditions or meetings in hotel rooms. Sometimes he would attack the women and sometimes rape them. At other times he would pressure them into sex by holding out the prospect of a part or threatening to ruin their careers.

Many women complained to their agents afterwards. ‘That’s just Harvey being Harvey,’ more than one agent told a client. At the most influential agency in Hollywood, MCC, eight different women told eight different agents about what he had done to them. None of the agents did anything.

It was not just that the industry protected Weinstein. It was that everyone in the industry knew what he was doing. Hilary Clinton, Barack Obama, Diane Feinstein and the other Democratic politicians he raised money for and partied with may or may not have known what the industry knew. But the women abused certainly believed what Weinstein said about his connections.

Maureen Dowd put it this way in her regular column in the *New York Times* in November, 2017: ‘As Janice Min, the former editor of the *Hollywood Reporter*, told me, when Barack Obama stepped off a stage and into Weinstein’s arms for a big hug after giving a \$400,000 speech as an ex-president in the spring [of 2017], it sent a signal that the ogre was in a protected magic circle.’[\[30\]](#)

The ‘\$400,000 speech’ means that Obama was paid that much for giving the speech. Maureen Dowd is a feminist, a liberal and a prominent journalist for the paper of record in the United States.

There is no direct evidence of Obama’s support, and we are inclined to believe it is a myth. Hilary Clinton’s support for Weinstein is a different matter.

Ronan Farrow’s riveting book *Catch and Kill* tells the story of how he attempted to expose Weinstein in 2017. Farrow was working as a journalist at the television network NBC. He says that on at least two occasions Hilary Clinton rang up his bosses on Weinstein’s behalf to urge them to make Farrow drop the investigation. And she must have known.[\[31\]](#)

It goes to the top, and it comes down from the top.

### **From the Top Down**

The long, determined cover up from the top down of Weinstein’s abuse and rape is, sadly, only one of many. In Britain, the politician Cyril Smith was protected from on high until his

death. Jimmy Saville, a TV performer and DJ who raped hundreds of young women in the children's homes and hospitals where he was a patron, was friends with members of the Royal Family and knighted by Margaret Thatcher.

In the United States, accounts of the love island and sex trafficking of Jeffrey Epstein were rehearsed in the conviction of Ghislaine Maxwell. After the trial the prosecutors announced that they would bring no further prosecutions of anyone else, leaving a remarkable number of rich white men off the hook. Larry Nassar, who abused more than 200 Olympic gymnasts and other athletes, was protected over decades by dozens of staff at Michigan State University and US gymnastics. [\[32\]](#)

In Chile an uprising began in 2017. The political parties were absent, and the unions were ambivalent. The organization doing most to bring the revolt together was the national alliance of feminists.

The Chilean feminists had a song that became the anthem of the revolution and spread around the world. Immense crowds of women danced as they sang. The words they shouted were a concise summary of a theory about the relationship between sexual violence and the state. And as they shouted, they pointed -

‘You, the police,’ they shouted, ‘you are the rapists.’

‘You, prosecutor, you are the rapist.’

‘You, judge, are the rapist.’

‘You, mister president, you are the rapist. You.’

They meant that the whole state machine had encouraged and enabled rape by failing to prosecute, and by covering up, harassment and sexual violence. They also meant that the president, as the head of the state machine, was responsible for allowing such things to continue.

When they said ‘rape’, it stood as well for the violence and injustice of the Pinochet dictatorship and the arrogance and

complicity of the rich for the past forty years. And they did not mean only Chile. They meant cops and judges and leaders all over the world. They meant also Trump and Putin, Obama and the Clintons, Assad and Modi, Lula and Merkel - all of them.

This felt like something everyone had always known, but hardly anyone had shouted in public. It was the manifesto of feminists who felt class fury and wanted to change the world. It also sums up our argument here.

### **Due Process**

Let us now turn to the next question: What about due process and fair trials?[\[33\]](#)

The open letters in defence of alleged abusers almost always mention fair process. The Harvard letter did too. Such paragraphs can be enraging for anyone who wants justice for the abused. But this is a complicated area, because most people do believe justice should be fair.

The model many people have in mind seems to be an ideal version of a criminal trial. In this version the accused has access to all the evidence, has all sorts of rights, and is presumed innocent until proven guilty.

This is not what happens with sexual harassment cases at work. First, there are almost never criminal trials for sexual offences. The great majority of sexual harassment cases are dealt with in some sort of workplace investigation. In these workplaces, the employer is the prosecutor, the judge and the jury. There is often little due process. Indeed, it would be very costly and few employers could afford the legal expenses. This alone is a very important reason you need a union.

The standard of proof is did the person do it, in the opinion of a manager, on the balance of the evidence?

Before the Weinstein case in 2017, workplace sexual harassment cases routinely backed up the manager or the professor.

But the Weinstein case bankrupted a whole corporation. After that, corporations in some industries got rid of dirty CEOs overnight when they had to. Before, there had been no fair process for abused women and men. Now with some employers there was no fair process for the abusers. The reason was the same in both cases - keep it secret and protect the company.

But the bias in the large majority of cases is still toward protecting the manager.

Some few cases of sexual harassment do go to a civil trial. In these civil cases, there is no accused, just a plaintiff and a defendant. No one goes to jail, and no one is guilty. A judge or jury finds for one side, or the other. And one side or the other may have to pay damages. The standard of proof is on 'the probability of the evidence', not 'beyond a reasonable doubt'.

There is often due process in such a civil trial. When companies are suing each other, business usually does want a fair trial.

Meanwhile, the accused in a criminal trial almost never enjoy due process. This is because 97% of criminal defendants in the United States now take a plea bargain. They plead guilty, and in return the prosecution withdraws a charge with a far more serious penalty. In effect, only 3% of criminal defendants in the United States find due process available.

And we need to make one further point here. The majority of complaints of rape or sexual assault in the United States never make it to court. In England and Wales, only a tiny proportion do so. This does not mean the woman or man who complains is lying. It means most people do not get justice. It does not mean that any particular accused person is innocent, nor that they are guilty.

People are entirely right to insist that the accused in all cases, in courts and before employers, should have due process. Indeed, for most people this is the most sensible reason for joining a union.

But we are angered by the idea that only well-educated men accused of sexual harassment should enjoy due process, when nobody in their right mind thinks that young women, or young men, who bring forward complaints of sexual violence or harassment receive that privilege.

But let's take a deep breath. That paragraph in an open letter saying that the alleged abuser did not get full process may be in bad faith. It may be a red herring. It may be a lie, and it may be enraging.

But the people who drafted that letter put that paragraph in for a reason. They know that the people who read the letter, like you, like us, want justice and fairness.

It is, however, easy enough to imagine how both sides could enjoy due process and fair justice. Indeed, many people have imagined just that.

### **Unions, Socialists and Feminists**

There is a way to fight for fair process. Unions. In a moment we will talk about a long and important strike at Columbia University in the last year over fair process in sexual harassment cases. But first we need to call your attention to a strange absence.

There have been many thousands of MeToo cases in American workplaces, colleges, schools, churches and military units over the last five years. These have been local class struggles over the most important feminist issue of the day.

Class, workplaces, feminism. Where were the leftists and the feminists? Nowhere. Where were the unions? With honourable exceptions, almost nowhere, until very recently.

It's not like MeToo is a niche issue. Rather, this absence is an important sign of something broken in the organised feminist and socialist politics. And that something badly needs to be fixed.

Unions too have been mostly absent. In spite of the prominence and success of the MeToo movement in Hollywood, the Screen Actors Guild refused to take sides. So has the American Association of University Professors. Almost all workplace organising over sexual harassment and abuse have been outside unions. This is true globally, not just in the United States.

This is beginning to change. In the Balakrishnan case at UC Santa Cruz in 2017-18, the union local for graduate student teachers was central to the struggle. And the long strike at Columbia marks a seismic shift.

### **The Columbia Strike**

From time to time, a strike is of national importance because it focuses on an issue central to the lives of many employers and many workers. Both sides understand that the outcome of the strike is likely to mark a national shift in the balance of class power over this issue. For this reason, such a strike is usually long and bitter. The strike at Columbia University in New York was such a strike. The issue was 'third-party' arbitration for cases of sexual harassment.

Columbia is a private Ivy League university. But it's in New York City, and traditionally has the most radical students of the Ivies. As with other large universities, a great proportion of the teaching is done by graduate students who are paid a stipend way below a professor's salary. At many American universities these

student teachers have been joining unions, often a local branch of a long-established union. At Columbia, that union was a local of the United Auto Workers.

About 3,000 student teachers went on strike on March 15, 2021. Zoe Dostal, a student worker rep, reported from the negotiations the next day on twitter. To make sense of her tweet you need to understand that a firm of private lawyers was negotiating for the university. This is normal in the United States.

Dostal tweeted:

Columbia lawyers refused to consider third party arbitration for cases of discrimination and harassment. When pressed to explain why, CU insisted that in-house investigations and disciplinary action are fair and free of bias. When pressed further, the CU lawyers said, “it would be too COSTLY for the university, and not financially.”

Let’s explore what was at issue. Unions in the United States typically sign contracts with an employer that last three to five years. The contracts run to hundreds of pages and cover the details of working practices in many workplaces. In signing the contract, the union enters into an agreement that there will be no local strikes over grievances until the contract expires in three years or five. Such local strikes do happen, but they have to be unofficial ‘wildcat strikes’ without formal union backing.

In return, the employer agrees to a grievance procedure for dealing with local cases. This grievance procedure often involves ‘third-party arbitration’. Where the union local and the management cannot agree on the outcome of a grievance, it goes to an arbitrator.

That arbitrator is a person chosen jointly by the union and the employer. They are also paid jointly by both parties. Specialist arbitrators make some or all of their income this way. They do not get the work unless they have a reputation with both sides for

being fair. This does not mean that arbitrators would always rule for people who had been sexually harassed. It does mean that they would rule that way at least half the time.

Crucially, the decision of the arbitrator is ‘binding’. In this way, it is different from the practice of ‘mediation’ in British industrial relations, which requires both sides to agree. It is also different from the practice in British industrial tribunals, which allows the employer to pay a fine and then get rid of the worker. Another difference is that British industrial tribunals are appointed by the government, and rule for the employer in the large majority of cases.

The union at Columbia was pressing for arbitration both for cases of sexual harassment, and for cases of discrimination of other kinds, including on the grounds of race, gender, sexual orientation and disability. This was fair, necessary and important. But it was clear to everyone that sexual harassment was the sticking point for the management.

What did that lawyer for Columbia mean by ‘it would be too COSTLY for the university, and I don’t mean financially’?

Well, he was a lawyer from what’s called a ‘white-shoe’ law firm, one that specializes in representing respectable corporations and rich individuals. Such firms delegate the dirty and the criminal work to other firms. He was billing Columbia several hundred dollars an hour. He must have been acutely aware of the feelings of his firm’s other clients about this case. He must also have known that such corporations, rich donors and alumni were communicating their feelings to the university administration. [\[34\]](#)

We think Zoe Dostal understood what we understand by ‘costly, and not financially.’ He meant that Columbia would pay a political price, because this issue mattered politically to those corporations and rich people. They cared about the implications not just for Columbia, but for their families, fraternities,

corporations and class. Of course, part of that political price would be the consequences for individual, corporate and foundation donations to the university.

What happened over the course of the strike highlights something anyone active in American unions right now needs to keep in mind. Taking on an employer is serious business, and you need strong support among the workers. But at crucial moments you may well come into conflict with the national or local leadership of the union, or both. You need to be ready for when that happens, and recruit enough support from union members to press on.

We should say, however, that in the United States right now even an old line, quite right-wing union like the United Auto Workers is more likely to back serious militant action than almost any union in Britain, France or Italy today. Most union officials in the United States are acutely aware that they are in an existential struggle. They draw encouragement from the very large social movements on the streets in the last few years. The strike at Columbia would not have taken the form it did without the Weinstein and Epstein cases, and many hundreds of local Me Too struggles in workplaces over the last few years.

There are still problems with American unions, as in all countries. A month into the strike the Columbia management made an offer which accepted many of the union demands, but not arbitration. The union negotiating committee, the elected leaders of the student workers, voted 7 to 3 to accept the deal. Then the members voted.

There are many things wrong with industrial relations law in the United States. But one very good thing is that unions are required to hold a vote of their members on strike before they accept a deal and call off the strike. We would love to have such a rule in Britain.

In this case the student strikers voted 1093 to 970 to reject the deal. In some ways such a close victory is often the worst possible result for militants. In this case, the depth of feeling and solidarity was such that the strikers stayed out for another month, and then voted to go back to work.

After the strike, argument continued among the students and in the union local. Under pressure they could not bear, seven of the ten on the bargaining committee resigned. On July 2, the members elected a new committee, committed to continue the fight. Eight of the ten elected were new to the committee.

In September the new committee balloted the membership on authorization to go back on strike. The vote was 1,804 to 234 for a strike. 3,000 students walked out together on November 3. That day it was the third largest strike in the United States. The other two soon settled, and by December, it was the largest strike in the country. Many local Democratic politicians, and some celebrities, showed support on the picket lines. Undergraduate students and many faculty rallied round too.

There was only one issue. Lilian Coe was a sixth year PhD student in the neuroscience department and sat on the bargaining committee. She told *The Indy*:

'There's a little black book that circulates in the neuroscience department that contains a running list of abusive professors and labs to avoid based on claims of harassment or sexual abuse.

'We really need more protection. We need more than little black books to keep people out of abusive labs. ... [Arbitration] would incentivize Columbia to stop abuse before it starts, and to remedy abuse before it reaches the level of arbitration. ... Everybody here is fired up because they see exactly what we are fighting for and exactly how reasonable we are.'[\[35\]](#)

At one point the administration even suggested that the strikers should accept the process Harvard had agreed with their union to deal with harassment. No way, the bargaining committee said. They had talked to the union local at Harvard.

In the spring, the student workers at Columbia were on strike for 63 days the first time. This time, in the winter, they were out for 62 days. The management hung tough through December, probably expecting the strikers to crumble over Christmas. On December 22 the university made a final offer. The next day the university president wrote an op-ed in the *Wall Street Journal* praising his own offer. The bargaining committee said no.

In the last days of the strike, the bargaining committee live streamed all their negotiations with the university administration. It was a beautiful innovation. Many strikers watched.

On December 30 the university administration crumbled and conceded arbitration. They needed the labour of those 3,000 teachers. The strikers voted by 93.5% to accept. They had won.

That victory resonated with managements and graduate student unions across the country. In early January, the management at Princeton offered the grad students' union local a 25% pay rise before negotiations even began. At MIT, 5,000 grad students have joined the union local in one month. At universities across the country, union locals began discussing how to win fair arbitration.

The question of how to get due process and fair justice had been answered. That answer has implications for feminists, and unions, across the country and around the world.

The union local at Columbia was able to establish this precedent for several reasons.

Columbia had long been relatively left-wing. Crucially, the union membership were all precariously employed, and they were in their twenties, so especially vulnerable to sexual harassment and

assault. Their generation had markedly more radical views on sexual harassment, sexual assault and almost every other social issue than older people. And their union branch was not held back by the social conservatism of older members. Moreover, they were building on the momentum of both Black Lives Matter and Me Too.

All these are reasons why it happened at Columbia first. But now the precedent is there. Activists in every union in the United States know what can be done. Let's spread that knowledge globally.

The victory at Columbia was an essential background to the fight at Harvard over the letter a month later. It gave courage to the students at Harvard and elsewhere. The struggle over that letter at Harvard was much smaller than the struggle at Columbia. But in some ways the victory is just as important.

Remember what we said about Comaroff's smile and turning points in class struggle? The retraction of the open letter by 34 of the 38 signatories was such a moment. It matters particularly because Harvard is an elite institution on a global scale.

The struggle against sexual violence has long been deeper and wider in India than in the United States. But not that many people in the rest of the world noticed the riot in Delhi or Sarkar's List. The Weinstein case reverberated across the world, because it happened in the United States, and in Hollywood.

In the same way, the saga of the Harvard has been closely observed by students and staff at Wits in Johannesburg, LSE in London, JNU in Delhi and many, many other places. Expect more action.

### **From the Top Down - Intellectual Bullying and Ideologies of Inequality**

Now we come to our last question. How can you do good work in such a toxic environment? In practice, intellectual bullying and sexual harassment and abuse are often inseparable aspects of a class dynamic. But their effects are not the same.

It is evident from Twitter that the case at Harvard is reminding a lot of graduate students and young scholars of just how bad things are. If things are that bad, how can they concentrate to produce good work? If the people whose work they admire side with abusers, and the abusers prosper, what is the point?

Our answers start from one of the main reasons why universities and corporate donors allow abusive professors. The reason is that the whole structure of patronage, bullying and intellectual terrorism serves the interests of capital.

Here's how that works. The people who run society can't just get by on scaring people to death. They need consent. They need systems of ideas. They need different systems of ideas for the right, for the centre and for the left. But they need all those systems of ideas to be within the bounds that the rule of capital can tolerate. Here the universities are crucial.

In the United States, a small number of large high prestige universities train the majority of people who get jobs at the other colleges. The professors in those high prestige universities, are the ones trained there and control most of the high prestige journals in each field. The large and prestigious university presses are at the top universities, and publication by a few top presses is the route to the best jobs.

The second tier of universities train the people who will work in the third tier. The dominant ideas in every discipline cascade downwards from a few institutions at the top, like Harvard. So control of what graduate students say, and write, and therefore of what they can think, is crucial to the dominance of the ruling class.[\[36\]](#)

Of course, there are a lot of other places where ideas are pumped out that are used to control people, like TV and Hollywood and so on. And where do you think the people who control those institutions went to college?

The structure of bullying and small undermining cruelty that permits harassment is also essential to the job of ideological control. The student who goes too far, whose voice is too fierce, is disciplined by a grade, by a cut in funding, but also by a gentle laugh, by an acid remark, by being exposed as stupid or ignorant. And the student who can toe the line is rewarded with a wink, a smile, a drink, praise and the hope of a job.

Students learn to compete with each other, for only a few of them are going to get a job.

That's why graduate school feels so bad for so many people. It's because you are made to feel small for saying the wrong thing, by people who may be smarter and certainly are more experienced than you. And even when you know that in fact it was the right thing, you can still be made to feel small because you are not as pretty, or your clothes are cheaper, your accent is wrong, you're a woman, a lesbian, the wrong colour, disabled, working class, went to the wrong college, don't know the right words. The policing of intellectual and political borders is internalised as personal hurt.

But the battle lines in the war of ideas are never fixed. The endless battle over ideas in the universities, and outside the universities, is another part of the class struggle. Like the rest of the class struggle, the balance of power shifts. And that balance shifts with what is going on in the wider society, but it also shifts with what is going on in the department.

In times when the balance is moving toward the power of the employers, students can be disciplined to accept any old nonsense: CBT, biological explanations of mental health, evolutionary psychology, orthodox economic theory, postmodernism, genetic

explanations of sexuality, the ontological turn, or maybe the world is run by sadistic lizards.

In other times, and other places, new ideas can break through.

That's why it is so important for the people who dominate the society to support bullies in running elite universities.

Even in those situations, you can still do good work.

Jonathan has written an article which will give you some [useful ideas about how to do that](#), and Nancy has written about [anthropologists taking sides](#). [37]

### **The Clarity of Resistance**

But resistance to neoliberalism, to corporate control and to corrupt democracies and dictatorships is increasing globally. In the United States, too, the signs of resistance are everywhere. That does not mean people's lives are getting better. Indeed, a lot of the resistance is because daily life is getting worse. Moreover, the fact that the centre cannot hold means some people are moving towards liberation, but some are moving towards racist, misogynist reaction.

The new resistance by graduate students at Columbia, at Harvard and other elite universities matters here. It has begun to make a difference already. After Columbia, after the Harvard letter, there will be a lot more to come. People will be able to think more clearly.

Graduate students will also be able to think in another way. MeToo and Black Lives Matter are both class movements. Labour unions, even strikes, are no longer something people do ten thousand miles away or one hundred years ago. Strikes are something that people like you do, now, right in front of you.

We said earlier that it does not much matter what class you think you are, because your boss is still going to tell you what to do. But what class you think you are does matter politically. Most professionally educated people have two possible ways of thinking about themselves.

They can think of themselves as workers like everyone else. Fundamentally, as people whose suffering comes from the same sources as everyone else. They can approach other people looking for what they have in common.

Or professionally educated people can think of themselves as special and smart. Rather as pocket versions of the rulers of the universe. They can think of themselves as different. The left-wing version of this is to boast about how you are different by ‘checking your privilege’.

Both versions can make more or less sense at different times depending on what happens to your career, your health, your family or your life.

But union activity, Me Too, Black Lives Matter, all these put class back on the table. They have made it possible to think about class again in the United States. For forty years that has been the hard line in the university. You could talk about race, you could talk about gender, but you could not talk about class. Not really. Not class struggle. Not the class of people in the classroom.

That line is breaking down because people are breaking it down. We don’t want to get carried away here.

Well, actually, we really do want to get carried away, but it won’t do anyone any good. We are not going to see Red Harvard. The weight of money and power and ideology and inequality, gendered and otherwise, is too great. But the lines are moving, spaces are opening up.

The global movement against sexual violence is now changing the study of class and inequality across the board. Until

yesterday, when academics and others talked about class and sexual violence, they talked about gender-based violence and how poor men were more sexist and brutal. Now we can look at sexual violence, cover ups and the enabling of sexual violence from the top.

And perhaps we can build a different feminist movement, and a different socialist movement. The differences between the established feminists and Marxists who collude with abuse, and the young people who challenge them are in part about generations. But most of the difference is about class, both what class position people occupy, but also about which class side people choose.

### **Be Careful about Saying Stupid**

So yes, if you are a graduate student, the movements need you to push the intellectual boundaries. But we do have a couple of words of warning.

The habit of intellectual bullying used to police the limits of acceptable ideologies in the universities have left their mark on the way intellectuals in the social movements behave and talk. They too are tempted to use the same weapons used to discipline them on others - to make yourself feel better by making others feel stupid.

But don't be proud of being smart. There is a common type of progressive American, on the left, in the environmental movement, among feminists or queer activists. That person wants two things. First, they want desperately to be seen to have the right ideas, so no one can make belittle them or make fun of them. And they want to show they are not just smart, but smarter than other people.

That stuff is often naked on social media.

There are two mistakes here. Having the right ideas is a way of distinguishing yourself from the majority, who have the wrong ideas. But we have to change the world, because of climate change, above all else. To change the whole energy system of the world, we will be up against enormous established power. We can't do that without the support of majorities. That means we need the support of lots of people who currently have ideas you really don't agree with.

It's like a strike. To win a strike everyone has to stay out. You need radical action, but you need unity for radical action. For that, you have to approach other workers with respect. You can disagree over ideas, but never think that is a mark of your superiority. And if you have ever been on strike, you know there are people with terrible opinions who stand beside you, and people with progressive opinions who walk right through the picket line. Always, during every strike.

The other thing to watch out for in yourself is to never be proud of being smart. In the United States now the code word for class prejudice is 'stupid'. It's an ugly, lacerating word.

We know an eight-year-old girl who goes to a suburban school with well-to-do kids, and she couldn't read. The teacher said she had some kind of disorder. The diagnosis does not matter. The cool girls bullied her, taunted her for being stupid. She came home and told her mother, 'I hate my brain'.

The majority of Americans have been told they are stupid, and half believed it. They have also been told that because they have been labelled stupid, they are not going to get what they want in life, not get what they need, not get what their children need, not get their fair share. And that they do believe, because that is true.

That's a deep hurt.

Don't forget that there are more than two million people behind bars right now in the United States. It is a bigger proportion of the population than any country has ever jailed, except briefly for political reasons. That mass incarceration is racialised - black people are four times more likely to go to jail. It's gendered - men are eleven times more likely. It's racialised and gendered - it's justified because black men are said to be thugs, animals, dangerous. It's classed too - a white man with only a high school education is four times more likely to go to jail than a black man with a college degree.

But above all, the people who go to jail, and especially the people who stay in prison, are the people who found themselves in the classes for slow learners and maybe never finished high school. They were not stupid. There are a lot of routes to those classes. But they were branded stupid, and then punished for it, in school and then with prison. [\[38\]](#)

Calling people stupid breaks lives, hopes, families, bodies. Stupid is the n-word of class hatred.

Don't be one of the 'progressives' on social media who say that Trump voters are stupid, then post a picture of someone who happens to look working class. The implication is often that people are right-wing and racist because they are stupid, and that they are stupid because they are working class. Don't presume about people's politics, don't scorn people for their class position. If you have brains and a good education, be an intellectual who wants to bring people together to change the world.

The last thing is this. If you read the lawyer's case file, you will see that when Lilia Kilburn grew afraid of Comaroff, she reached out to her fellow students for help. Everyone was too scared. She was alone. Then she found Amulya Mandava and Margaret Czerwieski. But Comaroff threatened them too, and they backed away. Kilburn was alone again. And then, after a time,

Mandava and Czerwieski gathered their courage and returned to help her.

The Harvard Grad Students Union - United Auto Workers Local 5118 elected a new leadership last Monday, February 7. Lilia Kilburn is the Feminist Working Group organiser, as she has been for some time. Amulya Mandava is the new vice-president of the local. Margaret Czerwinski is the sergeant-at-arms.

*Nancy Lindisfarne is an anthropologist and painter. Jonathan Neale is an historian and writer, and is on Twitter @JonathanNealeA1.*

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We have posted this in a hurry, and there are some mistakes in the notes and references. We will fix them as soon as we can.

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## NOTES

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[1] The best source is Sanford Heisler Sharp, 2022.

[2] Harvard Crimson, 2022; Chronicle of Higher Education, 2022.

[3] Brown et al, 2022.

[4] Sanford Heisler Sharp, 2022.

[5] Shankar and Sarkar, 2017; Chatterjee 2018; Washington Post, 2018.

[6] Kidwal et al, 2017.

[7] Dasgupta 2018.

[8] See Paula Chakrabarty, 2022; Dubey, 2018; Chakravarti, 2016.

[9] Chatterjee, 2018.

[10] Subbaraman, 2018; UCSC 2018.

[11] Greenberg, 2018; Park, 2018.

[12] See Twohey et al, 2017.

[13] Bikales, 2020.

[14] Weiner 2013. We are also working from a video on Youtube which is no longer available, and from [www.realtalkdartmouth.wordpress.com](http://www.realtalkdartmouth.wordpress.com).

[15] Gusdorf 2013.

[16] Mettler 2013.

[17] Kingkade, 2014.

[18] Lamb 2014; *Democracy Now* 2014.

[19] McClintock, 2017. See also Flanagan, 2014.

[20] Flanagan, 2017.

[21] Kantor and Twohey, 2020.

[22] Neale, 2004.

[23] Pascale, 2021.

[24] Neale, 2004.

[25] Lindisfarne and Neale, 2015, 2019a, 2021b.

[26] McClintock, 2017.

[27] Lindisfarne and Neale, 2018a, 2018b and 2018c.

[28] Lindisfarne and Neale, 2021a.

[29] Twohey et al. 2017. See also Kantor and Twohey, 2020; Farrow, 2020.

[30] Dowd, 2017.

[31] Farrow, 2020; Lindisfarne and Neale, 2020.

[32] Brown, 2021; Debhollander, 2019; Edwards, 2021; Barr and Murphy, 2021; Davies, 2014; Lindisfarne and Neale, 2018d.

[33] Here too Anne McClintock, 2017, is particularly apt. But do also read Johnson, 2021.

[34] We use 'he' here, because we are pretty sure it was a man, and that Dostal would have said if it was a woman. We do not mean to imply that a woman lawyer would be better.

[35] The Indy, 2021.

[36] See Kawa et al, 2018.

[37] Neale, 2015; Lindisfarne, 2008.

[38] Ferguson, 2020; Nolan, 2011.