

# Marxist Spirit Underpins Campus Protests

 [realclearpolitics.com/articles/2015/12/15/marxist\\_spirit\\_underpins\\_campus\\_protests\\_129029.html](http://realclearpolitics.com/articles/2015/12/15/marxist_spirit_underpins_campus_protests_129029.html)

By Peter Berkowitz

RCP Contributor

December 15, 2015

The latest rounds of student rage over alleged racial discrimination—and the subsequent administrative acquiescence to student demands—at American universities should come as no surprise. For decades U.S. institutions of higher education have cultivated an obsession with supposedly hidden-but-ubiquitous oppression.

This is especially typical of the nation’s elite schools, which train the faculty and set the tone for campuses throughout the country. Now they are losing control.

In late October, a group of Yale undergraduates demanded a university-mandated Halloween dress code. When a residential college associate master invited them to consider alternatives—ignoring costumes they found offensive or explaining their concerns to the wearer—the educator (and her husband, the master of the college) were denounced. In response to the ensuing uproar, and on top of \$50 million he had already announced in early November to increase faculty diversity, Yale President Peter Salovey launched several other costly initiatives to promote understanding of race, identity, and inclusion.

In mid-November, at a “Blackout” rally at Brown University, Candice Ellis, class of 2016, declared, “We are here because of systemic and insidious problems of structural and institutional racism that prevail at Brown University, at Yale University, at Mizzou and at countless other institutions across the nation.” A week later, Brown President Christina Paxson unveiled a \$100 million plan to make Brown a “just and inclusive campus.”

The week after the Brown protests, Princeton student members of the Black Justice League occupied President Christopher Eisgruber’s office. In the agreement he signed to end the occupation, Eisgruber promised to consider taking down art featuring Woodrow Wilson and removing the great progressive’s name from the Princeton school of public policy and international affairs that bears it, on the grounds that the former president of Princeton and of the United States was a racist. Eisgruber also promised to expand support for cultural affinity groups, enhance cultural competency training throughout the university, and grant amnesty to the students who had taken over his office. He did not make public his promises’ price tag.

Then there’s Harvard. Early on the morning of Nov. 19—at least an hour and a half before her first class and well before the arrival of most students attending that morning’s first scheduled class—second-year Harvard Law School student Derecka Purnell, a racial justice community organizer, entered Wasserstein Hall. In the building’s main hallway, which is

adorned with glass-encased faculty portraits, she saw strips of black tape on the glass above the portraits of several black law professors. She took photographs and posted them on Facebook.

In an email to the law school community, Dean Martha Minow wrote that the police were investigating the vandalism as a hate crime and acknowledged that the law school—over which she has presided for six years and where she has taught since 1981—suffers from racism. She also announced that she would discuss with the HLS community the incorporation into orientation and first-year classes of more conversations about diversity and inclusion; improvement of faculty diversity; and discarding the HLS shield, which borrows images from the family crest of Isaac Royall Jr., an 18th-century slave owner who donated to Harvard.

The investigation of the vandalism continues, but much available evidence, gathered and analyzed by a group of anonymous HLS students at the website [Royall Asses](#), indicates that the taping was a hoax perpetrated by student activists to galvanize support to scrap the law school shield.

Writing with exemplary sobriety in a New York Times [op-ed](#), Randall Kennedy, one of the black professors over whose portrait black tape was placed, stated that he was neither “alarmed” nor “hurt.” He noted that with the investigation not yet complete he could not say with confidence whether the defacing was committed by a white racist or rather perhaps “it was meant to protest the perceived marginalization of black professors, or was a hoax meant to look like a racial insult in order to provoke a crisis, or was a rebuke to those who have recently been taping over the law school’s seal, which memorializes a family of slaveholders from colonial times.”

While insisting that accusations of racism must be taken seriously, Kennedy cautioned against the “tendency to indulge in self-diminishment by displaying an excessive vulnerability to perceived and actual slights and insults.”

In a [reply](#) arguing that Kennedy was wrong to entertain doubts, Jon Hanson, an HLS professor and director of [The Systemic Justice Project](#), and Jacob Lipton, a recent HLS graduate and the project’s program director, illuminated the style of thinking that informs much of the rage on campus, and not only about race.

Hanson and Lipton (both of whom are white) suggest that Kennedy’s “insensitivity” to student grievances stems from his focus on “explicit racism,” of the sort exhibited by “Bull Connor, George Wallace, and the KKK.” This, Hanson and Lipton concede, “is foreign—an alien from another time.”

But “systemic racism” is another matter.

“This type of racism can be hard to see and is often easy to dismiss,” they wrote. “It is malleable and insidious. It’s in the architecture of expectations, the ranking of authorities, the sway of circumstance, the nudge of defaults, and the grammar of culture.” Although often imperceptible to the unaided eye, they continued, systemic racism suffuses “the epistemic, existential, and relational systems that constitute us.” So great is its power that it is “defended even by those who are sometimes its victims.”

These are the very same sorts of extravagant claims that are characteristic of what was once called radical feminism — claims that have long been incorporated into conventional campus thinking. Both systemic racism and systemic sexism are said to be invisible, pervasive, and toxic. Neither is subject to standard criteria of evidence and argument. Indeed, to seek facts and reasoned analysis, according to the theoreticians of systemic oppression, is to show complicity in all-embracing structures of injustice. Freedom of speech and due process protections for the accused only reinforce the privilege of the oppressors. The oppressed, as defined by the theoreticians of systemic oppression, must not only be listened to but also affirmed and obeyed.

These attacks on the foundations of freedom and equality under law are nothing new. The beliefs animating such attacks—that individual rights encourage pernicious practices (such as worshiping God and acquiring private property); that law’s primary function is to serve as a tool by which oppressors keep the oppressed in place; and that the task of politics is to overcome the benighted concern with the blessings of freedom in order to convert hearts and minds to the one true secular faith—were all brilliantly articulated by the young Karl Marx.

Those who propound doctrines of systemic racism and sexism on today’s college campuses don’t think of themselves as Marxists. After all, who at our universities today seriously studies the writings of dead white men? If, however, the theoreticians of systemic oppression and their followers were to delve into Marx’s more philosophical writings—and the history of the movement that bears his name—it might give them a better sense of the roots of their radicalism and its despotic implications.

The immediate problem is that, undergirded by intolerance and dogmatism, the new programs to combat systemic racism and sexism to which elite universities will be devoting hundreds of millions of additional dollars will intensify the grievances they are supposedly meant to soothe.

*Peter Berkowitz is the Tad and Dianne Taube senior fellow at the Hoover Institution, Stanford University. His writings are posted at [PeterBerkowitz.com](http://PeterBerkowitz.com) and he can be followed on Twitter @BerkowitzPeter.*