

The politically driven campaign against Harvard anthropologist John Comaroff

David Walsh
15 March 2022

The attack on Harvard anthropology professor John Comaroff has taken to a new level the campaign to purge American colleges and universities on the basis of anti-democratic identity politics.

In late January, Harvard officials placed the South African-born Comaroff on unpaid administrative leave, and barred him from teaching required courses and taking on any additional graduate student advisees through the next academic year. University officials argued he had violated the school's sexual harassment and professional conduct policies.

The case has generated a great deal of confusion. Individuals who should be capable of making a serious, objective analysis have collapsed in the face of it, giving in to the pressures exerted by gender- and race-obsessed elements on the Harvard campus and beyond.

A case has been constructed against Comaroff that has no merit and no substance. There is nothing that remotely approaches proof of any wrongdoing. Rather, there are a series of allegations, many of them wild and preposterous, unsupported by any evidence. The acceptance of denunciations without verifiable evidence is the hallmark of a witch-hunt.

What is the background to this affair?

Lilia Kilburn, a Harvard graduate student in anthropology, alleges that Comaroff sexually harassed her, and two fellow students, Margaret Czerwiński and Amulya Mandava, claim that Comaroff retaliated against them when they began speaking about his alleged sexual misconduct.

A first, lengthy investigation by Harvard's Office for Dispute Resolution (ODR) dismissed all the allegations against Comaroff, including Kilburn's claims of sexual harassment, except one. The ODR found in Kilburn's "favor" only on the following issue: that Comaroff's warning her "over the course of approximately five minutes" about the danger of traveling with her partner as a same-sex couple in African countries where homosexuality was criminalized constituted "severe" sexual harassment.

Comaroff's caution about travel in certain parts of Africa is being dishonestly treated as an example of "white," anti-African prejudice and "bizarre racial politics." In fact, his warnings were entirely appropriate and in line with his professional responsibilities, as an adviser.

In 2014, Uganda's president Yoweri Museveni, who had just made anti-homosexuality laws "much tougher," told CNN in an exclusive interview that gay people were "unnatural." Museveni asserted that being homosexual was not a human right. "They're disgusting. What sort of people are they?"

In July 2015, at a press conference, Barack Obama and Kenyan president Uhuru Kenyatta publicly "spered over support for gay rights." Obama asserted, according to *Politico*, that "ensuring gay rights must be a priority on a continent—and in a country—where bias against gays is accepted, and violence against gays is common. ... Kenyatta repeated what he has said before about gay rights: it's 'a non-issue.'" Section 165 of the Kenyan Constitution outlaws same-sex marriages and stipulates a five-year jail sentence for any sexual practices between same-sex partners.

Ghana's president Nana Addo Dankwa Akufo-Addo, in a 2017

interview with Al Jazeera, openly defended the criminalization of homosexuality in his country. Meanwhile, according to *Africa News*, "Ghana's third most powerful man, Speaker of parliament Mike Ocuquaye ... is an ardent anti-gay rights activist." Ocuquaye declared, "It is becoming a human right in some countries. The right to do homosexuality. The right for a human being to sleep with an animal."

Kilburn argues that Comaroff's comments had nothing to do with the country that was the subject of her research, Cameroon.

A Human Rights Watch report, "Cameroon: Wave of Arrests, Abuse Against LGBT People," complete with a photograph of two transgender women in a miserable prison cell, dates from April 2021: "Cameroonian security forces have arbitrarily arrested, beaten, or threatened at least 24 people, including a 17-year-old boy, for alleged consensual same-sex conduct or gender nonconformity, since February 2021. ... At least one of them was forced to undergo an HIV test and anal examination."

"Based on Human Rights Watch's monitoring and discussions with Cameroonian nongovernmental organizations," the article goes on, "the recent accounts of abuse documented here seem to be part of an overall uptick in police action against lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) people in Cameroon. Sexual relations between people of the same sex are criminalized in Cameroon and punished with up to five years in prison."

Comaroff was alerting Kilburn to the reality that traveling with her partner in certain countries could place them in physical danger. It had nothing to do with his views on homosexuality or the African population. Comaroff has been doing research in southern Africa since the late 1960s. Every researcher knows he or she is highly dependent on the good will of local hosts. In many cases, institutions build up relationships with communities over the course of years, even decades, communities that may have different mores than those prevailing in Cambridge, Massachusetts. An untoward incident could have devastating consequences for an individual or an entire program. Comaroff had the right and the responsibility to raise the concern.

After the ODR issued its findings, the Faculty of Arts and Sciences (FAS) carried out a second inquiry, going over much of the same ground. An external fact finder found that Comaroff had threatened Mandava (which he denies) during an office hours advising session to stop her spreading rumors about his alleged sexual misconduct. On this basis, FAS dean Claudine Gay announced January 20 the entirely improper and illegitimate sanctions referred to above.

The February 4 open letter and the "retraction"

Gay's action prompted 38 of Comaroff's colleagues to issue an open letter February 4, signed by, among others, Shakespeare scholar and

cultural historian Stephen Greenblatt, literary critic and historian Henry Louis Gates Jr., historian Jill Lepore and law professor Randall Kennedy.

The letter pointed out that although “Comaroff had been accused by three students, only one allegation was found by Harvard’s Office of Dispute Resolution to have any merit,” the allegation about Comaroff’s warning about traveling “as a lesbian couple in a particular African country where homosexuality is illegal.”

The letter concluded, “We the undersigned know John Comaroff to be an excellent colleague, advisor and committed university citizen who has for five decades trained and advised hundreds of Ph.D. students of diverse backgrounds, who have subsequently become leaders in universities across the world. We are dismayed by Harvard’s sanctions against him and concerned about its effects on our ability to advise our own students.”

On February 8, Kilburn, Czerwienski and Mandava filed a lawsuit against Harvard demanding damages on the grounds that the university had failed to protect them against the unproven abuse and acts of retaliation.

The lawsuit intimidated most of the faculty members who had signed the February 4 letter. Five days later, 34 (eventually joined by one other) of the signatories publicly “retracted” their previous statement and aligned themselves with the campaign against Comaroff.

Kennedy is one of the handful who has demonstrated backbone. The law professor wrote in an email that the “initial open letter indicated deep concern, based on available information, about the university’s treatment of Professor Comaroff. ... No new information about which I am aware erases the [worries] that prompted me to sign the letter in the first place.”

The “retractees” included Greenblatt, Gates and Lepore. These are individuals who know something about the world, and something about history, including cultural history. They must be familiar, for example, with Arthur Miller’s *The Crucible*, which dramatizes the Salem, Massachusetts witch trials of 1692-1693. The play’s protagonist chooses to die, in the end, rather than sign a false confession of witchcraft.

In Henrik Ibsen’s *An Enemy of the People*, the medical officer of a small town is victimized by the authorities for daring to expose the contamination of the local spa. Despite the lynch-mob atmosphere that develops, the doctor refuses to back down. “The strongest man in the world,” he concludes, “is he who stands most alone.” A single juror in *Twelve Angry Men* (Sidney Lumet-Reginald Rose), in the face of bitter opposition, insists on seriously and fairly weighing the evidence against an impoverished 18-year-old youth.

Greenblatt, in *The Swerve*, an account of the birth of the Renaissance, chronicles the fates of Jan Hus, the Czech theologian, reformer and opponent of the Catholic Church hierarchy’s corruption, and Giordano Bruno, Italian philosopher, scientist and another “heretic,” both burned at the stake.

Hus, given multiple chances by Church officials to save his life by recanting, is reported to have replied, “I would not for a chapel of gold retreat from the truth!” Bruno was executed in February 1600 in Rome by the Inquisition. Greenblatt explains that Bruno “steadfastly refused to repent during the innumerable hours in which he had been harangued by teams of friars.”

Gates, in his Foreword to *Black Profiles in Courage*, notes that the book treats a group of people, including Harriet Tubman and Frederick Douglass “whose sacrifices were for the common good, whose will was unbending, whose individual ambitions and endowments they put in the service of a cause greater than personal wealth or fame.”

In her book *The Whites of Their Eyes*, Lepore writes about political theorist and revolutionary Thomas Paine and the harsh conditions facing American forces in the first years of the Revolutionary War. She explains that George Washington ordered Paine’s famous passage beginning, “These are the times that try men’s souls,” to be read “to his exhausted, frostbitten troops” on the eve of the surprise attack on Trenton in

December 1776.

It is easier to write about sacrificing everything for the sake of principle than to do so in real life. Hus, Bruno and others went to the stake for their beliefs. During the eras of the American Revolution and the Civil War, to speak out meant risking one’s life.

Greenblatt, Gates, Lepore and company have proven unable to withstand a hailstorm of angry tweets and a blustering legal complaint. Like Galileo, they were essentially shown the “instruments of torture” and warned, “What’s happening to Comaroff could easily happen to you!”

Even during the postwar Red Scare, there were liberals who resisted the hounding out of university professors for their left-wing ideas. Coming to the defense of the persecuted, even if the latter were political pariahs, was generally looked upon as something admirable. Today, virtually no one stands up for those who come under attack for various alleged transgressions. And all of this before the genuinely serious repression, of the life-threatening variety, even begins.

On February 20, 15 Harvard anthropology professors—including the department’s chair—asked Comaroff to resign, indicating they had “lost confidence” in him as a professor. One really must ask: Is there anyone with an ounce of courage left at this institution?

The “hierarchy of privilege”

The case against Comaroff and two other colleagues, Theodore Bestor (now deceased) and Gary Urton, was made in a May 29, 2020 article in the *Harvard Crimson* (“Protected by Decades-Old Power Structures, Three Renowned Harvard Anthropologists Face Allegations of Sexual Harassment”), an August 25, 2020 piece in the *Chronicle of Higher Education* (“The Patron—Harvard’s John Comaroff is an influential anthropologist and a dedicated adviser. Three women say he abused his power.”) and the February 8, 2022 legal complaint itself.

There is no need to go through these articles and documents exhaustively, they are publicly available and the interested reader can consult them. In any event, they contain little of substance, consisting overwhelmingly of rumors, gossip, vague claims and unsubstantiated allegations.

The opening sentences of the *Crimson* article indicate its general approach: “In 1986, a group of professors writing for the journal *Current Anthropology* found that the country’s most elite anthropology programs, including Harvard’s, operated based on a ‘hierarchy of prestige’ dominated by powerful tenured faculty.”

The professors did not find any such thing. They took the evident fact that there were tenured anthropology professors and, extrapolating from that, *concluded* there was a “hierarchy of privilege.” This is an ideological construction, based on the work of figures such as French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu.

Bourdieu, in “The Forms of Capital,” for example, pointed to the existence “of a network of connections” that “is the product of an endless effort at institution ... which is necessary in order to produce and reproduce lasting, useful relationships that can secure material or symbolic profits.” These social relationships “are directly usable in the short or long term, i.e., at transforming contingent relations, such as those of neighborhood, the workplace, or even kinship, into relationships that are at once necessary and elective, implying durable obligations subjectively felt ... or institutionally guaranteed.”

Bourdieu described what he took to be the social process that “reproduces the group” and “reaffirms the limits of the group,” and asserted that “Each member of the group is thus instituted as a custodian of the limits of the group.”

As is generally the case with the writings of post-structuralists and postmodernists, once the pretentious verbiage is examined and the “veil lifted,” the value of the ideas turns out to be zero (or less).

Working off such theories, Nicholas C. Kawa, in a 2018 article, “How Academic Hierarchy Shapes the Distribution of Precarity,” raised the question as to whether PhDs coming from “elite programs” were merely benefiting from the prestige “of their graduate institutions and prominent academic advisors?” Were hiring committees, faced with a stack of applications, asking: “Is this person the best qualified for the job advertised? Or, are they being swayed by the fact that an individual may have received his or her PhD from Chicago (or Harvard) and studied under Sahlins (or the Comaroffs)?”

Val Burris, in “The Academic Caste System: Prestige Hierarchies in PhD Exchange Networks” (2004), asserted that the “prestige of the department in which an academic received a PhD consistently ranks as the most important factor in determining the employment opportunities available to those entering the academic labor market.” After referring to Bourdieu, Burris concluded that the evidence indicating “academic status hierarchies are reproduced through processes of social closure and the accumulation of social capital should deepen our appreciation of just how impervious to change such hierarchies can be.”

These are not new complaints. It is the story of the struggle between generations, of the “old boys’ networks” controlled by doddering farts who refuse to give way to the brash and innovative “Young Turks” and “young men in a hurry.” Tales of the ensuing conflicts have been the stuff of innumerable novels and films. Richard Wagner based one of his greatest operas on this theme (*Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg*).

As general sociological descriptions, these studies have a certain validity, although, at best, they amount to little more than truisms. Such things certainly go on in the world. Organizational conservatism is not uncommon.

Of course, there are academics of a certain age in various fields who would do better to quietly step away. On the other hand, certain scholars continue to function at an exceptional level into their 70s and even 80s, bringing to their research and their students an immense degree of experience and expertise. And, to be blunt, there are handsomely compensated academics in their 30s and 40s who owe their careers entirely to their successful navigation of university politics.

In any case, the existence of a widespread condition is not evidence of wrongdoing in a particular case, and certainly not of covering up for abuse. This is the illegitimate “leap” being made here: you employ a French, postmodernist phrase and you feel entitled to cry “sexual harassment.”

The “hierarchy of privilege” becomes the magic formula, an all-enveloping force, that accounts for any and all phenomena. If an accusation against a tenured professor is denied or disproven, that is merely further, damning proof that such an “academic caste system” exists. As for active resistance to the attacks, by Comaroff and others, that is interpreted as an unmistakable sign of guilt. The media and the accusers adopt the approach of the Salem trial judges, as Emerson W. Baker outlines it in *A Storm of Witchcraft*, “Their strategy consisted of constructing a ‘guilty but unwilling to confess’ mentality by which they assumed that the defendants who refused to confess were lying.”

The “hierarchy of privilege” argument is circular, unanswerable—and spurious. If a prominent professor fails to help graduate student X or Y to find employment, he must be deliberately blocking X’s or Y’s career path. The objective facts of the job market and the demanding academic credentials required are simply left out of account.

Bourdieu-type theory cannot legitimately be wielded to drive forward a sexual harassment case unsupported by any facts. Such reasoning has quite sinister implications. On that basis, in the absence of any proof, a customer complaining to the authorities he or she was cheated by a Jewish

storeowner might invoke the anti-Semitic Protocols of the Elders of Zion and a worldwide “Judeo-Bolshevik” plot. In the Jim Crow South, atrocities were committed against blacks, including lynchings, on the basis that, after all, alleged sexual attacks had to be expected given African Americans’ “bestial” propensities. Preconceptions, including those about “powerful” predator-males, can play an extremely harmful social role.

The *Crimson* article and similar pieces proceed from the existence of a tenured professoriate to posit a conspiracy so all-encompassing that in a given case no actual crime need be proven. The matter is settled ahead of time. The wrongdoing already exists, it merely needs to find an appropriate human embodiment. For a variety of reasons, Comaroff was seen to fit the bill. The fact of the “hierarchy” then precludes the necessity to produce any concrete, convincing evidence. Mere allegations and denunciations, often involving sexual activity, will do. This is what has been happening at colleges and universities across the US.

There are more than a few parallels between the McCarthyite witch-hunts of the late 1940s and early 1950s and the present-day sexual misconduct campaign. The current process too is characterized by denunciations and reckless, unproven allegations; the use of anonymous informants; instantaneous conviction and punishment by media; the overnight destruction of reputations and careers; banning and blacklisting; public humiliation and disgrace; demands for repentance and mea culpas; a portion of the population seized by hysteria; the cowardice and treachery of liberalism; contempt for due process and the presumption of innocence; the undermining of elementary democratic rights; and the strengthening of the state and police powers.

But there is another similarity, along the lines of the “conspiracy” question we have just been discussing. In *Naming Names*, Victor Navasky points out that in trials of Communist Party leaders under the infamous Smith Act, FBI informants would testify about what some party member had said about the “principles of Marxism or Leninism,” in some location far distant from the one where the case was being tried, or where any of the defendants were present.

Navasky continues, “Defense lawyers regularly objected to this kind of testimony as hearsay, to no avail. The objections were generally overruled on the grounds that *in a conspiracy the acts of co-conspirators are binding on all members of the conspiracy*, whether or not present. ... Since the real defendant was the Communist Party, it did not matter that much of the evidence introduced and admitted had little or nothing to do with the particular men and women on trial.” [Emphasis added.]

The assault on individuals with lengthy academic résumés plays into the generalized attack on job security under way at every major institution of higher learning. Fierce competition currently rages over jobs, tenure track positions, pay and related matters. Adjunct professorships and other forms of contingent employment abound, with institutions taking every opportunity to exploit graduate students, part-time instructors and other vulnerable layers.

Under these circumstances, claims of sexual misconduct, racism and other transgressions, real, imagined or exaggerated, become a means of gaining leverage. Thus, the hostile references to the “old guard” and “white Africanist studies” that pop up in the Twitter accounts of supporters of Kilburn, Czerwienski and Mandava.

This aspect of the controversy was further brought home by a June 18, 2020 open letter, “For a Transformative Justice Approach,” prompted by the May 2020 *Crimson* piece and signed by graduate and undergraduate students in the Harvard Anthropology and African and African American Studies departments. Astonishingly, the open letter demanded that Harvard “immediately remove” Comaroff, Bestor and Urton “from both departments and the university at large, and revoke any privileges and titles they may hold before the start of the Fall 2020 term.”

The letter, on the other hand, expressed reservations about the *Crimson*’s “unhelpful gender essentialisms.” The issues at hand, it went on, “are

far-reaching, complex and cannot be reduced to a need to add more ‘women.’” The letter complained that such “essentialisms” have shielded “white and cis-women ... who have been complicit in enabling abuses” and have further marginalized “those for whom the abstract category of ‘women’ has long been a site of violence: trans, non binary, Black, Indigenous, and queer students, as well as other students of color.” In short, this element is concerned that any future division of the academic spoils, in the eventuality of the relevant departments being purged, might take place to its disadvantage.

A “whisper network”

The August 2020 article in the *Chronicle of Higher Education* repeated many of the same general arguments, but concentrated its fire on Comaroff, who appeared only peripherally in the *Crimson* piece. Its “guide” through the controversy was one of the complainants in the current lawsuit, graduate student Amulya Mandava. Her uncorroborated allegations were treated more or less as irrefutable fact.

According to the *Chronicle*, “Mandava had known Comaroff for nearly a decade; he was both a devoted adviser and one of the biggest names in her field. But she *had* heard the rumors. And when other students in the program asked her about Comaroff, she had shared them. ... Mandava was part of a whisper network, a well-worn and imperfect system for sharing information.”

The fact that at the outset the *Chronicle* article lent credence to a “whisper network” destroyed its trustworthiness. Why should anyone have taken another word seriously? This was the equivalent of conceding that the “information” being “shared” might well be rooted in nothing but malice, subjectivism or out-and-out falsehood.

A study of “moral panics” (mass hysteria) observes that “By definition, rumors are told without reliable factual documentation ... Rumors are hearsay; they are told, believed, and passed on not because of the weight of the evidence presented, but because of the expectations by tellers that they are true in the first place.” (Erich Goode and Nachman Ben-Yehuda, *Moral Panics: The Social Construction of Deviance*, 1994)

Goode and Ben-Yehuda further note that one of the factors that “feeds the rumor process” is “credulity, that is, a willingness to believe, to suspend disbelief, to hold one’s critical faculties about the validity of a story in abeyance.” The “enemy of rumor” is “a tendency to be questioning and skeptical about the truth of a rumor, or stories one hears in general. ... As a general rule, the more knowledgeable one is, both about the subject of the rumor and generally, the lower the likelihood that one will pass on a rumor one hears.”

The authors add that much of the time, “rumor is a distinctly ‘irrational’ process, that is, it often represents the need to verify deeply held beliefs and values far more than concrete facts. Often, rumor affirms in-group membership, virtue, and victimization, and out-group exploitation and wickedness.”

In *The Crucible*, Abigail Williams, a girl “with an endless capacity for dissembling” (in Miller’s phrase), observes that “the rumor of witchcraft is all about.” The “whisper network” she helps to organize, will lead to the execution of 20 people, 19 by hanging and one by being crushed to death, and the deaths of five others in jail.

The legal complaint

The *Chronicle* article first aired in public the complaints by Ms. Kilburn about sexual harassment by Comaroff. Indeed, she is the only named person to have made such complaints. They are repeated, in more lurid terms, in the legal complaint filed February 8.

Every day thousands of such documents are filed in American courts. An estimated 40 million lawsuits are filed every year in the US. In a legal complaint, lawyers are free to say almost anything they like. It simply puts the accused on notice of the charges and what remedy the plaintiff desires.

The complaint drawn up by lawyers for Kilburn, Czerwiński and Mandava consists of a series of allegations and claims that could not conceivably sustain a conclusion of guilt. In a court of law, there are rules on hearsay. The complaint contains unsubstantiated assertions, more rumors and gossip and accounts of situations that no one can evaluate, and appeals to a whole set of prejudices and preconceptions.

The lengthy, overheated narrative is larded with various unproven and unprovable claims against Comaroff. “For years,” we read, “he [Comaroff] has used that power and his perch at Harvard to exploit aspiring scholars: he kissed and groped students without their consent, made unwelcome sexual advances, and threatened to sabotage students’ careers if they complained.” No evidence is provided to back up this claim.

The phrase “on information and belief” is used six times in the complaint. “On information and belief” means that a given statement is not supported by any verified evidence. The statement is merely something an individual might have heard or suspects (or hopes) might be true.

In this passage, the phrase appears twice: “In 2007, on information and belief, Professor Comaroff initiated a sexual relationship with another female UChicago graduate student (‘UChicago Student 3’). But, on information and belief, once Professor Comaroff lost sexual interest in her, he used his influence to damage her career.”

The sexual harassment to which Kilburn claims she was subjected consists of two alleged attempts by Comaroff to kiss her and the “squeeze” of her thigh on another occasion. He denies he did any such thing.

A central pillar of the complaint is the claim that “Harvard’s deliberate indifference allowed Professor Comaroff to repeatedly and forcibly kiss Ms. Kilburn, grope her in public, imagine aloud her rape and murder, cut her off from other professors, and derail her academic trajectory.” There is no corroboration for any of this.

The lawsuit argues that “Harvard allowed Professor Comaroff’s behavior to continue for two years—subjecting Ms. Kilburn to a continuing nightmare that included more forced kissing [in fact, one additional alleged kiss, after an initial alleged incident in February 2017], groping, persistent invitations to socialize alone off-campus, and coercive control.”

Kilburn and her lawyer would have us believe that Comaroff, a man of sound mind and considerable intelligence and experience of the world, would “repeatedly” over the course of two years sexually harass a young woman he knew to be gay and someone who had clearly developed an implacable, lingo-like hatred of him. This is psychologically implausible in the extreme.

The complaint argues numerous times that Harvard “ignored” the trio’s allegations (in fact, the word appears 15 times). On the contrary, given the present climate, one can be certain that having received the allegations, university officials held discussions at the highest levels regarding the content of the charges, as well as the appropriate procedure for handling them. The complaint’s central premise that Harvard “ignored” the allegations is factually unlikely.

In this regard, the following formulation in the complaint is noteworthy: “Other survivors have publicly attested that Harvard has ‘ignored some of the most egregious cases of harm and sexual harassment that were brought to their office because of lack of documentary evidence.’” So, Harvard

did not, in fact, “ignore” the allegations in question. The university was aware of them, but declined to act in so far as they were not supported by evidence.

The document simply demands that anyone reading it take Kilburn’s, Czerwinski’s and Mandava’s allegations as indisputable fact. In its own backhanded manner, in the “fine print,” as it were, the complaint acknowledges that it contains nothing aside from unsubstantiated claims.

“At one time,” the lawsuit reads, “Harvard’s written procedures concerning complaints of sexual assault explicitly provided that Harvard ordinarily would not consider a case unless allegations were supported by ‘independent corroborating evidence.’ Harvard has since removed that requirement from its published procedures, but it has persisted in practice. There is a consensus among scholars that the archaic historical requirement of independent corroboration in cases of gender violence (and sexual assault in particular) rests on biases against women as lacking credibility.”

In other words, despite the serious weakening of the rights of the accused, some residual concern that claims be backed up by additional evidence still persists within the Harvard procedure. The document demands the end once and for all of such concerns and that women should simply “be believed.”

Having involved themselves in a disruptive vendetta against Comaroff for several years, which came to virtually nothing, the three graduate students are now demanding compensation from the university. One of the other most common phrases in the legal complaint, also recurring numerous times, is “Plaintiffs are entitled to all legal and equitable remedies available ... including compensatory damages.”

A witch-hunt

An examination of the various allegations reveals there is no credible evidence Comaroff is guilty of any misconduct. In fact, the controversy has nothing to do with sexual wrongdoing by Comaroff or anyone else, much less the elementary right of women to be free from harassment and abuse at work or in school. Properly speaking, the ongoing effort is a campaign of denunciations. The accusers exploit an unhealthy environment in which the public is encouraged to believe that where there is smoke, there must be fire. But in many cases—and certainly in the case of John Comaroff—what is at work is a smoke-making machine.

Professor Comaroff is the victim of a politically motivated witch-hunt.

The current drive at Harvard is an effort by a mercenary social layer to destroy the reputation of reputable scholars and drive them out, under the dishonest banner of dismantling a “hierarchy of privilege.” There is nothing “left” about this effort, which speaks to the anti-democratic, diseased character of the affluent social elements at work.

The Comaroff controversy could only occur in a degraded intellectual climate where irrationality is elevated above reason, emotional appeals above factual analysis. Decades of postmodern sophistry, subjectivism and linguistic “deconstruction,” which dominate the humanities, have played their part, weakening the attention paid to objectively existing, law-governed processes and shifting the focus to various forms of racist, feminist and “left” myth-making, to self and identity and to one’s own “narrative” (and, inevitably, bruised feelings), regardless of its truth or non-truth. The Nietzschean spirit holds considerable sway: “The falseness of an opinion is not for us any objection to it.”

A climate of fear has been created on college campuses, in some ways worse than that prevailing during the McCarthy period, in which vast pressure is brought to bear on anyone audacious enough to come to the defense of those under attack. This has created an environment of

humiliating recantations and escalating attacks on academic freedom and democratic rights.

It is high time to put a stop to the campaigns of denunciation, vilification and victimization. The unequivocal defense of Professor John Comaroff would be an appropriate starting point for the counter-offensive against the witch-hunters.



To contact the WSW and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact