

Fear and Loathing at Oberlin



A pleasing Land of Drowsyhed it was:

Of Dreams that wave before the half-shut Eye;
And of gay Castles in the Clouds that pass,
For ever flushing round a Summer-Sky:
There eke the soft Delights, that witchingly
Instil a wanton Sweetness through the Breast,
And the calm of Pleasures always hover'd nigh;
But whate'er smack'd of Noyance, or Unrest,
Was far far off expell'd from this delicious Nest.

– James Thomson, *The Castle of Indolence*

You don't hear a heck of a lot about Oberlin College, the liberal arts college in Ohio, but on Wednesday Hugh Fitzgerald

wrote [here](#) about an esteemed member of its faculty, Mohammad Jafar Mahallati, who has enjoyed the unanimous support of Oberlin's top administrators. Mahallati, reported Fitzgerald, served as Iran's ambassador to the UN in the late 1980s, where, among other things, he promoted "genocidal antisemitism," denounced the Baha'i people (hundreds of whom "have been executed or murdered" in Iran), and helped cover up the mass execution of political prisoners. At Oberlin, he teaches Religion, Islamic Studies, and Middle East and North African Studies.

This wasn't Oberlin's first time in the spotlight this month. A couple of weeks ago the college got a good deal of social-media attention after Peter Fray-Witzer, one of its 3,000-odd students, took to the *Oberlin Review* to pen an ardent [j'accuse](#). You see, an e-mail had gone out from Josh Matos, "the area coordinator for Multicultural and Identity-Based Communities," informing students that radiator installations were scheduled to take place in the "Women and Trans Collective," a dorm in which Fray-Witzer resides. Being "very averse to people entering my personal space," especially when those people are "strangers" and "cisgender men," Fray-Witzer was rendered "angry, scared, and confused" by the news of this unwanted intrusion, which would damage the "feeling of safety and protection" ordinarily provided by the Collective. Why, asked Fray-Witzer, couldn't the installation have been scheduled during the summer?

Three score and seven years ago, men Fray-Witzer's age stormed the beaches of Normandy. Now this. American colleges once taught young people to deal with challenging ideas and experiences. Now the most expensive of them – Oberlin is America's 11th costliest college, beating Yale at #18 and Stanford at #50 – are padded playpens where their pampered students, the presumed leaders of tomorrow (is Fray-Witzer, by any chance, the child of Harvard law [professor](#) Sharon Fray-Witzer?) expect to be protected from the slightest hint of

distress. And when they graduate they become – well, they become those totalitarian tenderfoots who were protesting Dave Chappelle’s latest comedy special outside of Netflix the other day.

No wonder Fray-Witzer’s tantrum went viral. “Ponder the rotted roots of an ideology,” [commented](#) Glenn Greenwald, “that convinces highly privileged and wealthy students at elite colleges that the guys who come to fix their radiators are their oppressors, and that the ones whose family is paying \$80k/year are the oppressed.”

I’ve never been to Oberlin, but the campus looks beautiful in photographs, with lovely old buildings and leafy grounds. Is Fray-Witzer, this sensitive flower, an outlier there? In search of an answer, I looked through recent copies of the *Oberlin Review*. The impression I got was of a college absolutely overrun by spoiled whippersnappers who do nothing but whine about the Eden into which they’ve been undeservedly plopped. In one article, Eric Schank [pillories](#) the school administrators for failing to recycle and eliminate the use of plastic. (To his credit, he does spell “minuscule” correctly.) In [another](#), Elizabeth Aduwo gripes that “a lot of white writers...write as if people of color don’t exist...They create worlds without race or, better yet, worlds where the only race is white.” (Of course, the equally PC flip side of this complaint is that when whites write about blacks they’re engaging in “cultural appropriation” and purporting to depict lives about which they actually know nothing.) In still another article, Aishwarya Krishnaswamp [grumbles](#) about how international students such as herself are treated at Oberlin:

When international students first arrive on campus, we are invited to an orientation to be more “American,” covering topics like tipping culture, politeness, double-meanings, and whatnot. While I appreciate the intention to make us feel more comfortable, I’m perplexed by the lack of an analogous orientation for domestic students on how to treat students

from a different country. While I'm here to adapt, there is a delicate balance between adaptation and assimilation.

(Of course, if the college hadn't offered the orientation, she'd probably be bellyaching about that.)

And Reginald Goudeau [wailed](#) about not having been paid on time for his gig as a *Review* columnist. Paid! To write for a college newspaper! A million years ago, I wrote for my own college newspaper, and if anybody had handed me money for it I'd have fallen into a dead faint. Among the columns for which Goudeau expected a paycheck were rants about Oberlin's allegedly inadequate mental-health [resources](#), about "how little this school listens to [Black](#) students," about how Oberlin's [COVID](#) policies disproportionately harm "Black and POC individuals," about the [commodification](#) of Juneteenth, and about "the intersectional oppression of racism and misogyny" [experienced](#) by black women at Oberlin. Reading Goudeau's repeated complaints about racism and overwork, I couldn't help thinking of the accounts by Heather [MacDonald](#) (in *The Diversity Delusion*) and Kenny [Xu](#) (in *AInconvenient Minority*) of the frustrations experienced by underqualified black students who get into highly selective colleges because of affirmative action, and who'd have been better off at less selective institutions.

To be sure, in comparison with many a major research university, a liberal-arts college like Oberlin tends to be awash in easy-A courses in "soft" subjects. Yes, you can pursue studies in biology or chemistry or math, if you insist, but you can also spend four years bouncing from one [course](#) to another with titles like "Actors, Stars, and the World Stage," "Lesbian, Gay, Bi and Transgender Identities," "Queer Poetry," "Queer Gestures – Dance and Performance," and even "Chinese Queer Cinema."

While the boys and girls at the *Oberlin Review* have found things to nag about all over campus, they seem not to have

been overly worked up about Professor Mahallati's poisonous rhetoric about Jews and Baha'i or his past employment by a regime that executed gays and apostates. Yes, they printed a [critique](#) of Mahallati by an Iranian refugee, but framed it as "part of a broader conversation about allegations" against him; when the Oberlin poohbahs "cleared" Mahallati of those allegations, the *Review* [article](#) included a generous comment by Geology chair Amanda Schmidt, a Baha'i believer, who said that she'd gotten along with Mahallati very well and gushed that "the role of individuals is to love all people for the sake of God. Because if we look at individuals and try to love them for themselves ... we'll become disappointed in them, but if we love them for the sake of God, then we will see God reflected in all human beings."

But back to Peter Fray-Witzer. After his (?) *cri de coeur* made Oberlin a worldwide byword for spoiled brattery, the *Review* published an [article](#), signed by several students, that seemed to be responding to the clamor. Acknowledging that there may well be truth in the claim that "Obies" (as they call themselves) enjoy "immense privilege" and that Oberlin instills in them "an ultra-liberal ideology so detached from the 'real world' that students emerge too sensitive to function in normal society," the authors suggested that "although Oberlin does not reflect the real world, it remains a better model for a just and equitable society than the one we currently live in" and that "there is something powerful in our college's objective to be a safe space for anyone who asks for it."

Sorry, kids, but no. It's a hilarious mark of your utter insularity that you think your idyllic little oasis of luxury and entitlement, of absurd cosseting and coddling – with its safe spaces and "Women and Trans Collectives" and "area coordinators for Multicultural and Identity-Based Communities" – is any kind of model for an "equitable society." Do you think that those radiator installers whom Fray-Witzer was

complaining about think you've got something "equitable" going on there? Your parents pay \$80,000 a year for you to attend Oberlin – \$30,000 more than the average household income in Lorain County, where the campus is situated. Given the length of the academic year, that comes to something over \$300 a night. For that kind of dough, you can book a room long-term at Claridge's in London or the Adlon in Berlin.

Also, just how do you reconcile your view of Oberlin as a "better model" with its readiness to shelter a preacher of genocide?

I hate to break it to you, kids, but your college, like dozens of other such pricey, adorable places (Williams, Wesleyan, Amherst, Reed, etc.), is a Cloud Cuckoo Land kept afloat on a massive cloud of your parents' cash, and if you don't realize just how much of a utopia it is – a gated community for the young and entitled and hopelessly narcissistic, who are repeatedly told that they're virtuous and egalitarian – it's because you've lived your whole lives in a bubble of affluence and have yet to step out of it. The day you do step out of it, and not a day earlier, will be – if you're lucky – the day on which your real education begins. My hope for all of you is that you'll end up learning to do something useful (radiator installation?), and that you'll learn enough to recognize your alma mater as a castle of indolence – and of, yes, indoctrination into a set of ideas, by turns preposterous and just plain evil, that have no connection whatsoever to objective reality or basic moral decency.

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