

The concerted, cowardly #MeToo attack on Harvard professor John Comaroff

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John Comaroff, professor of African and African American studies and of anthropology at Harvard University, has become the target of what has all the earmarks of another filthy #MeToo witch-hunt.

In August 2020, Comaroff was placed on paid administrative leave in the midst of an investigation into several allegations of “unwanted touching, verbal sexual harassment, and professional retaliation.”

Late last month, following a second investigation, Comaroff was placed on unpaid administrative leave and barred from teaching required courses and taking on any additional graduate student advisees through the next academic year. University officials allege that he violated the school’s sexual harassment and professional conduct policies in some unspecified manner.

Comaroff’s lawyers argued in a recent statement that following the initial “exhaustive investigation lasting more than a year, involving allegations by three complainants, Title IX investigators found John Comaroff responsible *solely* for verbal sexual harassment arising from a brief conversation during an office hour advising session. The advice he gave concerned the student’s physical security in field research.”

Comaroff apparently attempted to explain to a gay female student that traveling with her partner as a lesbian couple in Cameroon where homosexuality is illegal could lead to sexual violence. His lawyers pointed out that the 77-year-old anthropology professor insists “that it was not only his right, but his moral duty, to so advise her, because her proposed plans were objectively physically dangerous to her. The investigators found that he had no sexual or romantic intention.”

“The same student,” the lawyers assert, “accused Professor Comaroff of repeatedly imposing unwanted sexual contact on her. The Title IX investigators found that the evidence did not support those accusations, and found him not responsible for *any* of the other two complainants’ allegations.”

Apparently not satisfied with the results of this inquiry, Harvard officials launched “a second, kangaroo court process—lacking the most elemental aspects of due process and artificially limited to a defective record—to reexamine conduct already thoroughly investigated in the Title IX process. This process resulted in an illegitimate finding that Professor Comaroff was responsible for alleged unprofessional (but entirely non-sexual) conduct in another office hours advising session. Even in the latter proceedings, the factfinder concluded that the alleged harm ‘may not have been intended.’”

On this shabby basis, Faculty of Arts and Sciences Dean Claudine Gay announced the sanctions against Comaroff on January 20.

A vicious witch-hunt atmosphere prevails at institutions such as Harvard, particularly in the “humanities,” where elementary democratic procedures in regard to claims of sexual harassment have

been weakened or eliminated and emboldened race- and gender-fixed elements practice a type of intellectual terrorism.

The pressures being exerted are extremely intense and damaging. Anyone who resists faces ostracism and possible professional ruin. On February 4, in response to Gay’s action, 38 faculty members protested the sanctions against Comaroff. They included anthropologist and physician Paul Farmer, literary critic and historian Henry Louis Gates Jr., Shakespeare scholar Stephen Greenblatt, political scientist Jennifer Hochschild, historian Jill Lepore and law professor Randall Kennedy.

In regard to the claim that Comaroff had sexually harassed his student by warning her about travel in certain parts of Africa, the signatories pointed out that since they would also “feel ethically compelled to offer the same advice to any student conducting research in a country with similar prohibitions, we are perplexed. How can advice intended to protect an advisee from sexual violence be itself construed as sexual harassment?”

An open letter by 73 faculty members was immediately fired off, which denounced the pro-Comaroff signatories and expressed dismay “that these faculty members would openly align themselves against students who have lodged complaints about a tenured professor.” A remarkable statement! And what if the “tenured professor” happens to be entirely innocent?

The letter by the 73 dishonestly used the fact that prominent figures had expressed support for Comaroff: “As is evident from the letters written in his support, Professor Comaroff is a scholar with a powerful network of friends and colleagues. This raises the question of why three graduate students would go public with their complaints against him and willingly subject themselves to protracted, grueling, and potentially career-ending investigations. In lauding Professor Comaroff’s reputation while failing to consider the complainants’ perspectives, the signatories imply that the students have fabricated their accounts of harassment and retaliation.” So what? Why is that outside the realm of possibility?

For nearly five years now, the public has been subjected to a great deal of nonsense about the “bravery” of accusers, often anonymous, who have destroyed the careers and lives of musicians, actors, opera singers, media figures and politicians, generally on the flimsiest grounds, at best varieties of supposed verbal or physical “micro-aggression.” The accusers have been universally hailed, promoted and celebrated by the media. Far from proving “career-ending,” the launching of McCarthyite smears has become a growth industry.

The campaign against Comaroff has so far proven remarkably efficient and effective. Out of the 38 signatories, 34 have now withdrawn their initial protest, including Farmer, Gates, Greenblatt and Lepore. Hochschild and Kennedy seem to be among the handful

of principled holdouts.

Under the wretched heading, “We Retract,” the 34 present no evidence of wrongdoing by Comaroff, but simply apologize for their original concerns, which “were transparency, process and university procedures, which go beyond the merits of any individual case.” Why are they recanting their previous views? “We failed to appreciate the impact that this would have on our students”—in other words, they underestimated the ire their protest would provoke among the identity politics hysterics—“and we were lacking full information about the case.” Which “full information”? The professors don’t care to say.

Now they solidarize themselves with the 73, “regarding the need to seek ‘better protections and more expedient, transparent, equitable, and independent investigative procedures,’ and acknowledge this must be done “without presuming to know the full findings of confidential investigations or acting in ways that intimidate students and inhibit them from divulging experiences of harm.”

The (now) glorious 107 desire investigative procedures that further eviscerate democratic protections and announce they are far from “presuming” to question the sanctity of Harvard’s “confidential investigations.” That accusers have undergone “experiences of harm” is taken for granted.

Comaroff has been smeared, disciplined and publicly humiliated for what?

As for Harvard’s august democratic traditions, in October 2014, 28 law professors felt obliged to publish a statement sharply criticizing the institution’s new sexual harassment policy regarding conduct among students. The institution, the professors argued, “has adopted procedures for deciding cases of alleged sexual misconduct which lack the most basic elements of fairness and due process, [and] are overwhelmingly stacked against the accused.”

As the WWSWS noted, the law professors pointed to three concerns in particular: the absence in the new procedures “of any adequate opportunity to discover the facts charged and to confront witnesses and present a defense at an adversary hearing”; “the lodging of the functions of investigation, prosecution, fact-finding, and appellate review in one office”—and one that essentially has an incentive to find instances of sexual harassment; and “the failure to ensure adequate representation for the accused, particularly for students unable to afford representation.”

John Comaroff was born in Cape Town, South Africa, in 1945. His mother’s family were Jews from Lithuania, while his paternal grandfather was from Ukraine and emigrated to England, apparently to escape conscription into the tsarist army, and later first to Rhodesia and then Cape Town.

In a 2008 interview conducted by Kalman Applbaum, Comaroff explained that his “parents grew to maturity during the depression of the early 1930s and the war.” They were “aware of the Holocaust and afraid.” The National Party came to power in South Africa in 1948 under Prime Minister D.F. Malan, “who was quoted as saying that, had the Axis powers won the war, the final solution would have been applied in South Africa.” According to Comaroff, his parents “lived in fear of anti-Semitism, in a closed, Zionist community ... I grew up in Cape Town during the dark years of apartheid, in a very violent society. I was radicalized, as were many of our generation, by the Zionist socialist movements, which were more socialist than Zionist at that time, and in which many South African scholars got their training in leftist social theory.”

Harvard’s official biography of Comaroff notes that before coming to Cambridge, he was “the Harold H. Swift Distinguished Professor of

Anthropology at the University of Chicago. He is also an Honorary Professor of Anthropology at the University of Cape Town, and an Affiliated Research Professor at the American Bar Foundation. His current research in South Africa is on crime, policing, and the workings of the state, on democracy and difference, and on postcolonial politics.”

His authored and edited books, with his wife and fellow Harvard professor Jean Comaroff, include *Of Revelation and Revolution, Ethnography and the Historical Imagination, Modernity and its Malcontents, Civil Society and the Political Imagination in Africa, Millennial Capitalism and the Culture of Neoliberalism, Law and Disorder in the Postcolony, Ethnicity, Inc., Zombies et frontières à l’ère néolibérale, Theory from the South: or, how Euro-America is evolving toward Africa* and *The Truth About Crime: Policing and the Metaphysics of Disorder*.

Comaroff’s list of awards, grants, distinguished lectures and professional recognition goes on for several pages.

Part of the motivation behind the drive to censure and, with any luck, drive Comaroff out at Harvard lies in professional rivalry and ambition. He and others like him are no doubt seen by aspiring elements as intolerable career impediments. As social tensions mount and university employment becomes either highly precarious or increasingly difficult to obtain at all, the conflict over positions must grow even more bitter and ferocious. The manufacture or exaggeration of personal or sexual frictions and their leveraging through anti-democratic university procedures is one of the inevitable results.

A self-consumed, disoriented petty bourgeois layer—perpetually convinced that it is hard done by; unsympathetic to the conditions of the broad layers of the population; indifferent to the questions of war, the pandemic and the threat of fascism; impotent and frightened in the face of the ruling elite but ferocious about its own privileges and petty concerns—is ready at hand to be manipulated and mobilized in cases like the Comaroff affair.



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