

Cultural Bites

with Fernando Gómez Herrera, Visiting Assistant Professor of Hispanic Studies

Kaptur Displays Political Obedience in Campus Talk

Ohio Representative Marcy Kaptur came to Oberlin on March 7 to speak about current American policies in Afghanistan and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The senior Democratic congresswoman adopted the tone of a gentle nurse not wanting to upset the patients in a medical facility (which, as we've seen in *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, is not a good idea). She presented insufficient information about the monumental problems facing American society, and some members of the audience threw the metaphorical chamber pot at her in the end.

It seemed that she was speaking under self-imposed censorship — she alluded to problems (big-money lobbyists and monopolies, for example) but spent only a sentence or two discussing them, and she maintained total silence on the United States' two current wars.

Kaptur did not deviate from the policy. She had nothing to say about foreign "policy," let alone any specifics dealing with Washington politics. She delivered simple sound bites working on the assumption that the Oberlin community cannot swallow unpleasant truths about the U.S.

Kaptur used conventional pep-talk and lots of euphemisms about "how ingenious the American system is and the American people are," but her endorsement of U.S. citizens as missionaries abroad, representing the U.S. as a "beacon of liberty," helping others' was problematic. Here, Kaptur expressed a Hobbesian view, paralleling the classic English author without mentioning his name. Using his ideas, she spoke of "unleashing peace" in the Afghan "theater." Note how she turned a bad noun (war) into a good one (peace) and shortened the "theater of war." I was gritting my teeth.

Was anyone amused? I don't think Kaptur mentioned Iraq or Afghanistan by name once. Her "solution" to the problems in the Middle East: promoting energy independence and endorsing the occasional volunteer working in village reconstruction in Palestine.

How should we work out these geopolitical interests? One unoriginal motto echoed throughout: "Think globally, act locally." What did that mean? Counter-productive alliances in the Middle East happened because of oil dependency, so let us disentangle from these foreign entanglements.

Kaptur said she felt inspired by projects such as making Oberlin a sustainable community. "Go green." Go figure! Oberlin as a model for U.S. foreign policy? Will she say that in Congress? She suggested self-sufficiency in regard to American resources, as this nation's oil relations "do not respect liberty." The more you think about any of this, the worse it looks, since we are dealing with a seasoned politician.

Were there any political ideas in this pep talk? None. Any references to foreign concepts that could inspire the U.S.? Zero. Anything specific about Congress and the U.S.? Nope. The idea that Americans will save themselves by unplugging from the rest of the planet is an endogenous fallacy.

Am I the only one sensing the xenophobic sting that Kaptur brought to Oberlin? But trouble is there, not here, and as Kaptur said, "Washington will have to catch up with the American people."

And yet, she said, "The American people know the system has to change." From what to what? She did not say. "If only we had free trade!" she said. A friction-free exchange of goods, services and peoples without monopolies? How?

And Kaptur's praise: "We are down-to-earth, practical people. It is in our power [to change]." There was rhetorical under-development, even untruth, in the dumbing down of the "encouraging" message. What to do then, according to her? Keep the funds local! Put your money in Ohio banks! Would this appeal move the transient populations passing through the College?

Kaptur's advice about what to do boils down to: Write more, do more. Also, write letters to *The New York Times*. Kaptur's message was about the necessity of carrying the Republic forward, or bringing a broad opinion to Congress and "getting the best of us [out there] and share it." Americans "do not understand the mistreatment of minorities" (what?) because "we are practical people."

Americans do not understand that a president has to be Sunni or Shiite to get elected? (again, what?). America is not good at working with the crazies. Yet, we have to be behind George Mitchell, Obama's special envoy to the Middle East, to keep the pressure over there. And the kicker: The military is the "greatest ally" in achieving the goal of energy independence because "the military — a force for good — cares for oil."

Kaptur closed by summoning some dark clouds: "When you are trying to do what's right, you get marginalized in Washington." She spoke of the concentration of wealth in the U.S. and troubling features in the political system ("We live in the mega era of Leviathan companies"). I do not think I was the only one with a flat affect here.

This critique in no way prevents me from showing my support for students for a Free Palestine, possibly the most dynamic student association in Oberlin, which was instrumental in bringing Kaptur to campus. Perhaps Dennis Kucinich will be next.

Capitalism Glorifies False Sense of Freedom

Shannon Ikebe

As I argued in my article last week, capitalism is inherently antithetical to genuine liberty and democracy. However, one of the biggest crimes that capitalism is committing against humanity in our age is the planetary ecological destruction, which is fundamentally caused by the capitalist mode of production and the culture it shapes.

A common argument for capitalism brings up the crucial importance of a free-market economy for our culture and way of life. There is no doubt that capitalism has a hegemonic status in our culture, and such a statement means no more than the meaningless assertion of its power. The vital question is, of course, what aspects of our culture it is that capitalism promotes and shapes.

In the light of the truthless, Social Darwinian ethic that free-market capitalism preaches, the connection between rampant capitalism and our misogynistic, heteronormative culture that marginalizes many groups seems worthy of further investigation. Nonetheless, it is clear that the very culture that is destroying the planet's habitability for humankind through devastating climate change rests upon the continued operation of a free-market economy.

Every year, billions of dollars are spent to persuade (or brainwash) citizens to perceive the need to acquire further material goods, and further billions are spent to produce these goods while exploiting workers and polluting the environment to death. Capitalism's imperative to "grow or die" and its glorification of greed as "freedom" without regard to the consequences mean that the system can only survive through the creation of false needs through advertising. It is why the survival of the civilization — which is indeed the indispensable precondition for the freedoms we cherish — is most likely to require the death of free-market capitalism.

The often-made charge of hypocrisy against anti-capitalists attending Oberlin on the basis of our market partici-

pation is absurd. Besides the complete lack of consideration for the widespread availability of scholarships at Oberlin, and the non-profit nature of the College that is rather anomalous in capitalism, if participation in a capitalist market transaction makes you a hypocrite when you criticize capitalism, no worker can ever be a socialist. After all, what can be more capitalist than selling your labor power to your employer?

Furthermore, such an argument entirely misses the point of such education. It was precisely the fantastic educational opportunities at Oberlin that made me a socialist, and I have heartfelt gratitude for them. When I came to Oberlin, I was left-leaning and sympathetic to Marxism, but I was equally fascinated by liberalism. The more I read, learn, write, question and discuss capitalism, the more untenable it has become for me to justify it. The most fruitful use of the amazing education that Oberlin offers is to radically question conventional, hegemonic ideas like the indispensable connection between capitalism and freedom.

Having been blessed with an opportunity to be part of the Oberlin community, which celebrates social change, I would answer the defining Oberlin question of "how do you want to change the world?" as follows: "By becoming a socialist intellectual, I want to take the world back from the fingertips of capitalists in order to establish a true liberty, democracy and justice in the world free from capitalism."

Yes, it is essentially a power struggle: capitalists have with them glorified greed and power whose ugliness knows no limits, and we, democratic socialists, have intelligence, justice and conscience with us. Throughout history, the two opposing forces have clashed; and as a testimony to the tragedy of humanity, the forces of greed and hegemonic power have usually triumphed. But the outcomes of the future confrontations are always undetermined, in the history that our generation is going to make. It is up to you to determine which side you should be on.

Concluding Thoughts

De-mystifying the Senior Gift

Anna Ernst

What up, Oberlin. My name is Anna Ernst, and apparently I am graduating on May 31. Though this is a little unnerving to think about right now, especially since my picture of the rest of my life currently resembles a black hole I am glad that I will be doing so along with the rest of the incredibly intelligent and good-looking class of 2010.

As a matter of "about me," I'll say that I have been lucky to have tasted so much of what Oberlin has to offer. Being a musical student major has allowed me to spend fairly equal amounts of time in both our lovely little College and Obama-approved Conservatory. Academically, I got to dabble in everything from art history to geology to religion, and I picked up a Hispanic studies minor with the help of a semester in Córdoba, Spain, on Oberlin's PRESHCO program. My non-academic Oberlin experiences include Barrows, Burton, Third World House, the Ecumenical Christians of Oberlin, the Praying Mantis and the Oberlin Student Cooperative Association, among others, and I am a proud co-founder of the Oberlin College Arts and Sciences Orchestra and Active Minds at Oberlin.

In a nutshell, possibly one held by an albino squirrel, I love Oberlin. Over spring break, I realized that I have some things that I would like to say before I walk across the stage, and the *Review* has been kind enough to permit me some space to say them for the next month or so. Without further ado, I will plunge right into this week's topic, particularly pertinent to the class of 2010: the senior gift — what is it, what does it do and why should you care?

I'd say the chances are pretty good that you don't remember that when you enrolled at Oberlin, you sent in a \$300 matriculation deposit. Well, you did, and as this year's graduating class has hopefully heard by now, you have the option to get that deposit back. Or, you can contribute it to the senior gift.

Based on the results of a survey that Senior Class President Shana Oshto sent out via e-mail to all seniors, the Senior Gift Committee (of which I am a member) chose three initiatives to be supported by the class of 2010. They are:

1. The Student Scholarship Fund, a fund created by students, for students, that supports scholarships for future and current students;
2. The Young Alumni Initiative, a fund that will provide stipends for students pursuing unpaid internships; and
3. The Stevenson Compost Initiative, an initiative to buy a pulper/grinder to turn the 1,500 pounds of food waste that comes out of Stevie every week into viable composting material.

So, if you haven't heard about this already, maybe now you're thinking "OK, but I have already given a lot of money to Oberlin. Why should I give any more?"

The senior gift, as I have learned as a member of the Committee, is a unique opportunity for members of the senior class to support whatever projects they want to support and make an important, positive impact on future Obies. Do you know someone who might not have been able to afford Oberlin without a scholarship? If you choose to give to the Student Scholarship Fund, your money will really make scholarships happen. One hundred percent of the money that goes to this fund will help someone get a college education.

A really important, fun fact that I want to make sure everyone knows is that the Board of Trustees has agreed to match every gift with an additional \$25. So a \$75 donation to the Stevenson Compost Initiative gets us \$100 closer to composting that 1,500 pounds of food waste! Sweet. Also, the goal this year is to have 60 percent of the class of 2010 donate any portion of their \$300 to the senior gift, and we're already at 30 percent. If we get to 60 percent, President Kristlov will give \$350. The committee is planning at least one more FUNdraising event, a Senior Fave night, for the end of April, and we'll also have pledge cards at TGIF, so come out, have some fun and make good things happen at Oberlin with your money.

You can also check out the website for more information: www.oberlin.edu/seniorgift/. See you around in the sunshine, and I'll be back next week with reflections on OSCA on the eve of its 60th anniversary celebration.

Crossword Answers

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