

WELCOME  
The Johnston Gate,  
on the edge of  
Harvard Square,  
Cambridge,  
Massachusetts.  
Harvard Yard lies  
beyond.

# Harvard's Club Brawl

Breaking with centuries-old tradition, Harvard is moving to eliminate its all-male final clubs, charging that the Porcellian, A.D., Fox, Fly, and other high-end frats are bastions of patriarchal privilege, fomenters of sexual assault, and antithetical to its values.

Is any of that true? An alumnus who was “punched” by the Porcellian in 1972 (but didn’t join), JOHN SEDGWICK considers the legal, moral, and logical flaws in the college’s crusade—and the role played by a pornographic ice sculpture





In Harvard's relentless campaign to rid itself of the last seven of its all-male final clubs—the Porcellian, the A.D., the Fly, and four other high-end frats—most of what you need to know is encapsulated in the term the authorities use to refer to them: Unrecognized Single-Gender Social Organizations, or U.S.G.S.O.'s. Three parts Orwell, two parts Lenin, those five letters tell a lot about the mind-set of the bureaucrats who are, in the view of their detractors, going jihadi on these quirky, old-line places in frantic pursuit of “diversity” and “inclusion,” two terms so ubiquitous on campus, according to the Fly Club's lawyer Harvey Silverglate, that they leave him feeling “murderous.” And he's a card-carrying member of the A.C.L.U., a veteran of the Old Left who has had it with the New Left thought police. “They want a campus where everybody looks different but thinks alike,” says Silverglate. “That is their definition of diversity.”

I need to say up front that, when it comes to these relics of a former day, I'm about as ambivalent as the next person. Many of the Harvard men in my family were “Brothers Porcellian,” a term that conveys the full horror. As a Harvard freshman I was “punched” for the club myself, but declined. This was way back in 1972, when I was a member of a mildly socialist campus organization, heavy on attractive women, and I didn't see how I could be in both the Porcellian and the New American Movement. I kept my distance, but, when I wrote an article on the Porc later, I did enjoy hearing about the blend of wit,

eccentricity, extravagance, and repressed homosexuality in this bastion of Victorian masculinity tucked away over the old-line clothier J. August, across from Harvard Yard. Its street-side shades permanently drawn, it offered a view to the outside world only through an artfully positioned mirror, and it backed onto a garden dubbed Mrs. Graham's Hole, where one member is buried under a rosebush. All very Poe-ish, but to me it evoked evenings reciting Tennyson over absinthe with people who'd be friends for life. Now, of course, such a brotherhood is a bastion of the patriarchy, stinking of privilege and sexual exploitation, and it must be crushed by those with higher moral standards.

And the means of achieving this are pretty far along on the Draconian scale. Because all the male clubs own their buildings, support themselves, and rely on Harvard only for a steady supply of undergraduate men, the university can't legally stamp out these clubs for being single-gender, no matter how offensive that might be, any more than it could abolish the Harvard Book Store, likewise independent, for selling dirty audiobooks. The original plan, first floated by the administration in May of 2016, was simply to assume it was self-evident that single-sex social clubs are abhorrent, and if they don't “transition” into a full acceptance of “Harvard values of non-discrimination” by going gender-neutral, any outed members would be banished from the good graces of the Harvard community like the unrepentant sinners of Puritan days. They would be forbidden to represent Harvard as a captain of a sports team or an elected leader of their class, and they would not receive Harvard's backing for a Rhodes scholarship or other postgraduate honors. One drawback to this plan was that, the membership of the final clubs being mostly secret, no one knows exactly who the members are. Were they supposed to be rattled out by their friends?

The latest plan, presented in July, scraps the original plan altogether. It would ban outright the participation by Harvard students in “final clubs, fraternities or sororities, or other similar private, exclusionary social organizations.” The new plan, which would go into effect in the fall of 2018, states that “the College will take disciplinary action against students who are found to be participating in such organizations.” The disciplinary action would be overseen by the Administrative Board, and could include expulsion. There's still the problem of identifying the members, but the

prohibition at least has the virtue of clarity. It doesn't give you a choice. It throws out the final clubs, and much else besides.

#### Sanctionistas

Let's start by acknowledging that it's unclear exactly what will happen. Announcing a “plan” in any academic setting is not straightforward. There are constituencies to be heard from, notably the faculty, which at Harvard has a big say in disciplinary matters and on student life in general. The faculty is not expected to take up the new proposal until the fall.

That said, any form of prohibition poses a few obvious questions, starting with the legal one. Doesn't this violate the right to freedom of association that the Supreme Court found in the First and 14th Amendments? And isn't this all a little too reminiscent of the McCarthy years, when Harvard was expected to turn over the “pinkos” on the faculty? Or, before that, when President A. Lawrence Lowell hunted down gays? Is being in a club really that bad?

And while we're at it, how is it that Harvard is flaying the final clubs for being exclusionary but letting the Organization of Asian American Sisters in Service and the Black Men's Forum go scot-free? As it is, the campaign against all-male final clubs has now done a number on the other single-gender clubs that Harvard surely did not really want to wreck—the all-women clubs that have risen up to provide their own routes to power, bypassing the hegemonic patriarchal culture. To get at 500 male final-club members, Harvard would sacrifice 400 female ones, plus nearly 700 members of sororities and frats.

The proposed actions against the final clubs (and other entities) have been promoted by President Drew Faust and her chief administrative backer, College Dean Rakesh Khurana (or “Minister Khurana,” as he is now known to the trolls who monitor *The Harvard Crimson's* coverage), and they have yet to receive faculty consent. At a faculty meeting last December, several irked professors raised the issue themselves in the form of a motion preventing the college from interfering with student membership in any legal organizations. The sanctionistas, as club opponents are known, dodged that vote when Faust abruptly concluded the meeting. The next month, the administration promised to put together one of the world's larger blue-ribbon committees to study the matter—the com-

## A MORAL STANCE WOULD BE MORE GENUINE IF HARVARD STUDENTS CAME TO IT ON THEIR OWN.

mittee that issued a revised plan in July.

This last move took place at an ironic time, for President Faust—who has since indicated her intention to resign in 2018, after 11 years—was just then castigating President Donald J. Trump for issuing the first of his ill-fated executive orders restricting travel from seven predominantly Muslim nations. Yet his orders seemed, in fact, oddly similar to her own—drastically ideological, put forward without regard to popular support, and appearing to violate essential constitutional principles. Substitute Faust for Trump, and the seven all-male final clubs for the seven nations, and you have what Silverglate calls a “very interesting analogy.”

So, what gives?

#### The Ice Sculpture

By most accounts, the whole business started with Khurana, a man who shoulders many responsibilities. He might be four people, since he is simultaneously the Danoff Dean of the college; a professor of sociology and organizational behavior at the university; a professor of leadership development in the business school; and, with his wife, a faculty dean of Cabot House, a position that was called “master” until the term was dropped recently owing to a possible association in people's minds with slavery.

Khurana rarely speaks to the press and neither he nor Faust agreed to speak to me, and the university's media-relations department did not respond to requests for comment. So some speculation is required. A capable and affable fellow by all accounts, Khurana is believed to have his eye on a college presidency of his own one day, which may account for his tenacity in taking on clubs that seem both morally retrograde and unpopular. (There is, however, the discordant fact that his wife was a leading light at her sorority at Cornell, which both attended.) Ironically, he is perhaps

best known for his business book debunking the desirability of the charismatic leader as a C.E.O.—even as he seemingly strives to be such a person himself. He has been one of the chief sponsors of something called the MBA Oath, declaring adherence to ethical principles of Khurana's collaborative design, and he sometimes opens faculty meetings by riffing on the Harvard mission statement, which has caused grumbling among professors who prefer to devise their own platitudes.

As the new dean, Khurana doubled down on his indignation over U.S.G.S.O.'s after a risqué account of final-club party antics appeared in *Elle* magazine in November 2015, written by a female Harvard graduate who had participated in them. The account included salient details about the drippings from an ice sculpture of a lusty nude at one of the club's weekend frolics, to which women were invited. “Her frozen breasts are enormous; her back is arched. And if you crouch beneath her thighs, you can guzzle a shot of Rubinoff vodka that a hoarse-voiced senior will pour for you down her icy frame.” That may have done it for the clubs, right there. For it came on top of an earlier incident, when Khurana found out that the Spee Club had had the effrontery to send around an invitation to a “pajama party,” along with a link to a YouTube video showing scantily clad women.

Soon it was open season on the final clubs as places of Rabelaisian debauchery, where unsuspecting (or even suspecting) women were defiled for male sport. The early reports zeroed in on the sexual element and seized on a bit of data with all the excitement of Hercule Poirot discovering a dropped handkerchief. It seemed that, while 31 percent of female Harvard seniors had experienced “nonconsensual sexual contact”—a term that was not defined—since entering college, the figure was a full 47 percent for women who participated in final clubs (including women who are

members of female final clubs). However, those two data points did not address an essential question: how much of this contact stemmed directly from encounters at final clubs or involved club members? That remained anyone's guess.

But there was also this: an astonishing 75 percent of all such behavior occurred not on club premises but in Harvard dorms. That led to the inescapable conclusion that, if Harvard really was serious about eliminating unwanted contact, it would make dorms single-sex, as they'd all been before the previous wave of political correctness turned them all coed back in my day.

Besides, several of the final clubs, chiefly the Porcellian and the A.D., resolutely forbade the presence of guests of either gender in the clubhouse, so it was safe to say that the incidence of errant heterosexuality on the premises was zero. As the Porcellian Club's graduate head, Charles Storey, president of the Harpoon Brewery, pointed out to the *Crimson*, if the club were to admit women, the “sexual misconduct” there could only rise. As far as anyone knew, it was the first time in recent memory that any club official had spoken publicly about the club's doings in its 225-year history, and the second time was not likely to come for another 225 years at least. Storey's observation was widely ridiculed—as if Porkers would be unable to stop themselves if they spotted a woman in the club—and Storey duly resigned.

#### LinkedIn for the Rich

Once the statisticians started scrutinizing the numbers, the sexual-assault angle disappeared, to be replaced by a new argument: the all-male final clubs were reprehensible because they were unfair to the women they excluded—this because they provided clear paths to money, power, and fame via an all-boy network





**NO GIRLS ALLOWED**  
Five of the historically all-male Harvard final clubs: (1) Owl, (2) Fox, (3) A.D., (4) Phoenix S.K., (5) Porcellian.

The P.C. culture has had a way of commandeering the public discourse by shaming the daylights out of anyone who takes the wrong side in some culture war—gender, class, race—that is presumed to have a single right side. On this one, the final clubs tick all the wrong boxes—male, elite, presumably white. Case closed.

### The Scientist

But public declarations of approved virtue can be different from actual feelings. And after Khurana and Faust floated the original plan, the story took an unexpected turn when feelings were actually assessed. While notions of cultural hegemony rule humanities departments, the sciences have less politicized ways of classifying reality. It was probably inevitable that the university's moralism would stop at the door of Harry R. Lewis, a former dean of the college and now a professor of computer science at the university's John A. Paulson School of Engineering and Applied Sciences. Lewis's office is at the other end of the university from the Barker Center, headquarters of the humanities, which is in the old Freshman Union building, a grand, high-ceilinged, wood-paneled dining hall and hangout that was meant to offer a private-club aura to all. Not anymore! At least one of the grand old club buildings, that of the Iroquois, has been re-purposed for Harvard function rooms after the club went out of business; the college seems to believe that it can blithely replace these atmospheric places with social areas like the Cambridge Queen's

that worked like a private LinkedIn for the rich. And, given that J.F.K. was in the Spee, everyone immediately believed that to be true. The membership being a state secret, it was impossible to know if this was *actually* true, and there are counterexamples. One current club officer—I've sworn not to reveal whom—is the first in his family to go to any college at all, let alone Harvard, and his dues are paid by a scholarship that his club quietly provides, as several do, contrary to impressions.

The anti-club campaign became reminiscent of the second Iraq war, whose mis-

sion likewise shifted with the facts. Nonetheless, before Khurana announced his original sanctions idea, the Spee declared that it would go coed to conform to the new morality, and the Fox followed suit a few weeks later.

It was still hard to say what was so bad about these clubs beyond the fact that they obviously were bad. The absence of hard information left critics to their worst imaginings. I might have pictured Tennyson and absinthe, but that was just me. Others saw nothing but sex scandals and undeserved partnerships at Goldman Sachs. Who knows?

LIKE THE SECOND  
IRAQ WAR, THE MISSION OF THE  
ANTI-CLUB CAMPAIGN  
SHIFTED WITH THE FACTS.



Head, an alcohol-limited pub run by Harvard's Office of Student Life that has all the charm of the Holiday Inn. The real problem here may be that Harvard doesn't offer kids anything much better to do on a Saturday night than get bombed at the Fly.

### Humming

When Lewis got wind of the move to sanction club members, he was reminded of the "bad history" of McCarthyism on campus, a notion that certainly didn't go away when he was slammed for being just like the cracker segregationists of the 50s. Lewis couldn't believe that students were nearly as rabid as Khurana seemed to think. Absent some Gallup poll, how was anyone to know?

By humming. Apparently, that's how computer engineers quickly determine the disposition of a large group about some new Internet standard, say. They take a hum. They do it for efficiency, but Lewis did it to maintain privacy on an issue potentially too inflammatory for anyone to feel safe going public. So after the sanctions idea was floated, he put the question to about 150 students in his introductory computer course. What did they think of these sanctions? Did they like them or not like them? The not-like hums were a lot louder than the like hums. That was surprising, given all the talk, but it was, to him, reassuring. It was the sound of tolerance.

"I've talked to various students; a lot of them just don't want Harvard interfering." That was the message Lewis took away: "Just leave us alone." He hadn't meant to start any kind of counter-crusade. He merely sent off a letter to Khurana saying there was another point of view. But the *Crimson* got a copy, and, says Lewis, "it all sort of blew up."

Harry Lewis is a patient and methodical fellow, nearing retirement after a lifetime at Harvard—he arrived as an undergraduate in 1964, almost a decade before I did. Once the battle was joined, Lewis was not one to give in. He clearly does not relish the idea of being the final clubs' savior, but he has been tireless in advancing the cause through countless op-eds and blogs, and at least one public debate. His basic idea was that maybe Harvard should take it down a notch. Don't punish students for their preferences, but do what universities are supposed to do: lay out the facts and let people decide for themselves. When freshmen arrive in September, they're hit by a barrage of information to help them make informed choices—on everything from how to choose a major to how to avoid an S.T.D. Maybe a brochure on the perils of final clubs as well?

### Extermination Campaign

Sensible as that may have seemed, the anti-club fury continued, even among people who should have known better. Louis Menand—the *New Yorker* writer, author of the Pulitzer Prize-winning *The Metaphysical Club*, and a Harvard English professor—got caught up in the frenzy, decrying as "pure sophistry" Lewis's motion to allow undergrads to join any clubs they like as long as the clubs are legal. "It basically says, 'We cannot discriminate against people who discriminate because that would be a form of discrimination,'" Menand declared at the faculty meeting called to discuss the matter. "Seriously? This is the kind of limits-of-tolerance hypothetical that you might be able to get away with in a freshman seminar, and it is unworthy of this faculty." He went on, his voice rising: "Of course we can be intolerant of intolerance, and of course we can discriminate against people who discriminate. That's what liberal societies do." It was quite an applause line,

but it's hard to know what everyone was cheering for. From John Locke through *The Federalist Papers*, that actually is what liberal societies do *not* do. That stance also assumes that the world beyond Harvard will be tolerant of this intolerance. At the same meeting, Henry Louis "Skip" Gates Jr., who heads Harvard's Hutchins Center for African & African American Research, was no less fervid as he decried the final clubs' "unique status and power on campus and in the broader Harvard world."

As opinions, some of the arguments against final clubs are not unreasonable. They do discriminate and they do favor old boys. They are without doubt a vestige of an *ancien régime* that is not the world we're heading into. But should these arguments stand as the last word, leaving Harvard students no choice but to obey? The university seems to be trying to force a moral stance that would be more genuine if Harvard students came to it on their own. The debate only intensified with the recent rescinding of admission to at least 10 accepted Harvard applicants for some errant attempts at humor on unfunny subjects like the Holocaust, sexual assault, and the death of children. The admitted students had posted them in a private chat group offering "Harvard memes for horny bourgeois teens." Naturally competitive, these

admitted students tried to outdo one another in ill-advised humor, and ended up violating about every norm of good taste. It was indeed offensive. But if Harvard is to police such online chat, what is to keep it from demanding to see e-mails and dream diaries in order to peer inside the tortured souls of would-be Harvardians for signs of the evil therein?

The moral presumption behind the anti-club fervor is not so different from what lies behind the loyalty oaths espoused by despotic societies everywhere. There is no opting out. The assumption is that by requiring you to agree to some proposition, it will enter your heart as a true conviction. Often, the opposite is true, which can breed suspicions about whether someone "really" believes what he's affirmed, or is "just saying" it. Such an oath can also foster a certain Maoist angst, if people don't actually believe something they've been obliged to proclaim. None of this captures the ideal

spirit of a university whose gates are emblazoned with ENTER TO GROW IN WISDOM.

In January, as faculty debate continued, Khurana formed his blue-ribbon "policy review" committee to reconsider the whole matter, with himself as the co-chair. The new policy-review committee released its report in July, replacing the original sanctions plan with a more drastic blanket prohibition against joining exclusionary groups of any sort. There's a long list of them, and it includes groups that have adopted gender-neutral policies, such as the Hasty Pudding Club. The issue is no longer exclusively about gender—which the report deemed "too narrow"—but rather about discrimination more broadly. "It is possible," Harvey Silverglate told me, "that this latest usurpation of faculty authority will sufficiently energize the faculty to begin to fight back." And he went on: "If it turns out to be a legal battle, it will be more of a potent challenge to the Harvard adminis-

### RIGHTS AND WRONGS

Left, Harvey Silverglate, photographed at his home office, in Cambridge. Right, Harry Lewis at his Brookline home.

tration than perhaps it is expecting." One also has to wonder: if institutions are to be closed down because they discriminate on some basis, or offer advantages not available to everyone, does Harvard University itself have something to worry about?

The image of those dripping breasts may not be the best advertisement for freedom of association, but plenty of Harvard undergrads of both genders clustered around it to join the fun. I suspect they're not all bad people. I don't regret skipping the Porcellian Club, but I can get behind its Latin motto. Dum Vivimus Vivamus. *While we live, let us live*. No one asked me, but I'm with the Old Left on this one, and screw the New. □



## IF DISCRIMINATION IS PROBLEMATIC, DOES HARVARD ITSELF HAVE SOMETHING TO WORRY ABOUT?