

Opinion: Berkeley is California's scapegoat

By Joe Mathews

Thank you, Berkeley.

Recent headlines should remind us Californians of yet another way we are lucky. Our state has the world's best scapegoat: you.

You—our most distinguished public university and all the people, institutions and neighborhoods surrounding it—serve as a punching bag for angry people of all manner of ideological preoccupations. The right and the center can pin all of California's liberal sins real and imagined, on you. And the left sees a reactionary threat in everything, from police action on or near campus, to the presence of law Professor John Yoo, who justified torture under President George W.,. Bush.



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Yes, California as a whole takes a lot of critical blows. But can you imagine how much more bloodied the rest of our state would be if we didn't have you around to absorb so much abuse?

In recent months, as a furious world chokes on its own populist vomit, it's been deeply reassuring to see you play your familiar role as California's sacrificial lamb.

First, you suffered widespread condemnation from President Trump and the media—both for your decision to cancel a speech by the Breitbart News provocateur Milo Yiannopoulos, and for the anarchist, anti-fascist violence (from arson to window smashing) that prompted the cancellation.

You and Berkeley police have patiently dealt with pro-Trump provocateurs who hold rallies near campus to start fights—as well as the anti-Trump counter-protesters who took the bait. And most recently, you've taken incoming from the left for permitting the right-wing diva Ann Coulter to speak on campus, before you got roasted by the right for canceling her appearance because you couldn't guarantee her safety.

You can't win any of these fights, of course, which is why you're such an easy target. And yet you endure—which is precisely what makes you so valuable to California. We Californians should be grateful to you for keeping so many cranks focused on you, instead of on our own neighborhoods and campuses.

When I think of you, I can't help but recall the work of the late philosopher Rene Girard, a professor at your rival Stanford (so I'll understand if you take him with a grain of salt). Girard wrote that modern society has become addicted to scapegoating, in part because it has value—in bringing people together and reducing the scale and damage of violence. “When human groups divide and become fragmented, during a period of malaise and conflicts, they may come to a point where they are reconciled again at the expense of a victim,” he wrote.

Indeed, you, as California's great scapegoat, are a protector of many vulnerable people. Just look around at the rest of the country and the world, where elected leaders and voting publics are scapegoating whole classes of people—migrants, Muslims, Mexicans. We haven't had the same level of scapegoating in California, and one reason for that is you take such a heavy helping of the racists' rage.

You're such a good scapegoat because you've had so much practice. Ronald Reagan built the most successful American political career of the last half-century on scapegoating you; he ran for governor declaring he would clean up "the mess at Berkeley" and made you a leading symbol of "a leadership gap and a morality and decency gap" in the country. In 1969, he sent the National Guard to deal with unrest around People's Park.

Of course, his successor, Jerry Brown, liked to poke you, too, even though he was a graduate. And pretty much every governor since then has taken swipes, both rhetorical and budgetary, at you. Legislators blame you for everything in higher education—you charge too much and admit too many out-of-state students—even though it's the Legislatures' systematic disinvestment in universities that forced you to pocket more of those higher, out-of-state tuitions.

If I were you, on the business end of so much blame-shifting, I'd be tempted to point out that Berkeley isn't all that different from other big public universities. But you won't make this argument in part because you know from long experience that perception is reality. After all, Bishop George Berkeley, the Irish philosopher for whom you are named, argued that even the objects we see in the world are really just ideas, made real only by the minds of those who perceive them.

Since the scapegoating of Berkeley is about your critics and not you, there's not much you can do about it. Except steel yourself for more.

Girard, the Stanford philosopher, said that as humans experience more identity-based conflict, scapegoating increases. "We easily see now that scapegoats multiply wherever human groups seek to lock themselves into a given identity—communal, local, national, ideological, racial, religious, and so on," he wrote.

I'm sorry, Berkeley. Times being how they are, California is going to need you to shoulder even more blame.

Joe Mathews writes the Connecting California column for Zócalo Public Square.