Society Against Itself: Political Correctness and Organizational Self-Destruction, by Howard S. Schwartz. London: Karnac Books, 2010, 240 pp., $37.95 paperback.

Alma Mater, Almus Pater

David Gordon

Identity politics is one of the most tragic elements in American political life today. Its unsavory antecedents are found in the European fascism of the 1930s; its workings are well known. Politicians tell voters with real or imagined grievances that they rightfully own places in business, the professions, and universities presently occupied by others. Meritocracy is the source of this injustice that must be eliminated. Racial, religious, and ethnic identity become the new keys to success. What followed in Europe were quotas, the infamous *numerus clausus* laws that were instituted in universities and professional organizations across central and eastern Europe in the lean and bitter decade of the 1930s. This was not social justice. It was a spoils system, designed to win votes for those who created it. It is a system to which too many American politicians are addicted today.

It is this injustice that Howard Schwartz attacks most forcefully and eloquently in *Society Against Itself: Political Correctness and Organizational Self-Destruction*. The effort is most welcome. There is much to be done to make things right.

Schwartz's criticisms in themselves are, of course, not entirely new. In 1992, Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., warned in *The Disuniting of America* of the dangers of ethnic politics, and the political uses to which it could be put. What is new is Schwartz's claim that much of this organizational self-destruction—which is what he calls the drive to abandon traditional measures of merit and achievement in order to promote ethnic and racial diversity—can usefully be explained as a fundamental struggle between Oedipal and anti-Oedipal drives.

In Schwartz's configuration, the Oedipal drive is represented by the father (still present in most families), through whose basic ideas, values,

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and rules society understands and governs itself. The father represents uncomfortable truths—"you are not valued for just being yourself but for what you contribute"—and demands the self-discipline and effort that make achievement possible. Under his guidance children develop objective self-consciousness. They acquire an understanding of the external world, which is indifferent to them and operates according to its own terms. They learn to draw a realistic boundary around themselves, and to differentiate between their conception of themselves and the ideas others have about them. They come to understand that they cannot have what they want just because they want it, but only if they do something that wins the respect of others.

Against this is raised the anti-Oedipal drive, the mother who is all-loving and accepting of her children as they are. She suggests that the world does not have to be a cold, heartless place, but a place of fulfillment attained *without effort*. One only has to exist to be loved. The problem, as Schwartz reminds us, is that when we choose this unconditional maternal love and cast out demanding paternal expectations, we destroy not only the importance of achievement, and therefore greatness, but the very idea of greatness.

Once this anti-Oedipal drive is embraced, the demands placed on the individual by society can only be seen as an intolerable imposition, something to be hated and destroyed. This, Schwartz claims, is the deepest source of the visceral and vehement hatred of standards. Phenomena such as affirmative action, although partially driven by political opportunism, are in the end only a symptom of something far more terrible: the desire to destroy the father—and with him much of the rational and productive social order he represents. It is manifested most painfully in irrational attacks, driven by hysteria, on authority. It is pursued most systematically through organizational self-destruction.

Self-destruction begins when an organization lowers its standards in order to demonstrate its love for those who cannot or will not accept their legitimacy, primarily because they lack the ability to meet them. Yielding to such impositions may be shameful, but, considering human frailty, understandable. Most destructive, as Schwartz points out, is the *internalized* desire to corrupt standards. Universities will not admit they are under intense pressure to lower standards. That would be politically incorrect, since it would violate the unspoken rule that the

oppressed are entitled to unconditional validation.

Instead, faculty and administrations alike create justifications for the assault on meritocracy. As Schwartz would have it, they have chosen to be maternal. They nurture—and in so doing encourage self-infantilization in their students. Moreover, by dropping demanding requirements for the sake of diversity, they begin to lose their distinctive place as institutions of higher education and become more like high schools and company training programs. Schwartz is at his most devastating in denouncing this trend.

The author also provides many examples of self-destruction outside academia. These range from the yielding of Texaco and Coca Cola to class action suits that ended in the promotion of members of aggrieved groups on an accelerated basis, to the even more devastating policies at Ford that increasingly based promotion on race rather than productivity.

Still more disturbing are criticisms of police departments, which, as attacks on one of the basic symbols of the paternal dynamic defined by law and rational order, Schwartz believes are in part inspired by anti-Oedipal impulses. Following charges of police brutality in Cincinnati and Seattle (the former following a 2001 riot sparked by the shooting of an unarmed suspect, and the latter after the killing of a felon by an officer attempting to save his partner), the police noticeably slackened their efforts in making arrests. In Seattle, officers cynically learned to call the new policies imposed on them "de-policing and tactical detachment"—to the detriment of social order and public safety.

Other examples of organizational self-destruction cannot be attributed to political pressure. First among these is the Jayson Blair scandal that rocked the *New York Times* in 2003. An affirmative action hire, Blair was long suspected in the *Times* news-room of plagiarism. He became notorious for filing fictitious interviews with Iraq war veterans. Blair had been kept on staff to meet diversity goals; political correctness prevented any discussion of his shortcomings until they became too great to be ignored.

The paternal drive, Schwartz reminds us, is the guardian of realistic thinking. The shift away from the paternal, reflected in the commitment to affirmative action hiring, was, he believes, mirrored in the increasing shift from the presentation of facts to advocacy in *Times* reporting. The result has been

a noticeable decline in the paper's credibility among the general public.

Schwartz's most audacious (and controversial) arguments revolve around the role of hysteria in this process of self-destruction. Not surprisingly, he finds the shrillest voices in academia, where "identity politics" and the resentments associated with it find expression in hatred of "the white male power structure" and "patriarchal hegemony." It is here that the notion that everyone *except* the white heterosexual male has been oppressed and denied a voice is most stridently proclaimed. The most predictable result is the torrent of charges of racism, sexism, etc., that has become a hallmark of almost every American campus. It is within academia that those most obsessed with an anti-Oedipal agenda are also quickest to make common cause with groups defined as oppressed. In this way, Schwartz explains, they are able to strengthen their hatred of the father, while expanding their own political power.

For Schwartz, hysteria is the root cause of Harvard president Larry Summers's forced resignation in 2006 following his remarks about the "unfortunate truth" that women show somewhat less aptitude than men for math and science. It also explains the demise of Antioch College, which suspended operations in the summer of 2008 after years of financial trouble and declining enrollment. This tragedy is close to the author's heart; Antioch is his alma mater. The destruction of the college was the result of a war conducted against its standards of achievement by students, faculty, and administration. As such, Schwartz finds it a signal example of institutional suicide.

A center of student radicalism, the New Left, and the anti-Vietnam War and Black Power movements, Antioch was torn apart in 1973 by a strike in support of supposedly under-funded affirmative action students. While black students participated, in the end they were only an instrument of the protest. No real accommodation was sought by the white middle-class student leaders who were its true organizers. The aim of the strike was the strike itself. It dealt the college a wound from which it never recovered. Once again, Schwartz finds an explanation for it all in the anti-Oedipal drive to destroy paternal authority, reason, and logic.[1]

Society Against Itself is not without certain weaknesses. The author occasionally takes directions not every reader may be willing to follow.

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[1]See Schwartz's detailed account of the school's demise in "Antioch Self-Destructs," in the Summer 2009 *Academic Questions* (vol. 22, no. 3).

For example, he is certainly daring in his discussion of one of his favorite themes—hysteria. Despite a passing acknowledgement of the existence of male hysterics, he squarely posits hysteria in the realm of the female, the maternal, while citing this as among the most potent weapons used against rational thought and achievement. Hysteria for him is the assertion of a woman's unique self in opposition to the common meaning the father represents. Still, statements such as "hysteria consists of the experience of being penetrated by masculine meaning, and the attempt to expel it, undermine it and destroy it," while vivid, will not convince everyone. Schwartz's speculation that the 1973 Antioch strike was, due to the presence of "ghetto-bred… swaggering black males," in part about the politics of sex, may leave readers equally skeptical (and disconcerted).

Despite these lapses, *Society Against Itself* makes a powerful first impression. Its arguments appreciate on reflection. Howard Schwartz's

basic conclusions seem most appropriate. He reminds us that political correctness redefines the world in a way that makes living in it impossible. Because it is informed by an unattainable goal of perfect equality, it makes war against every institution that exists, or any that could possibly exist. By undermining "confidence in the society in which one lives, belief in its philosophy, belief in its laws, and, ultimately, confidence in one's own mental powers," identity politics and political correctness present a fundamental threat to any civilization. Beneath the pretext of social justice, they are in fact only nihilistic. Still, there is hope. Their greatest weakness lies in their being centered in the irrational and the infantile. This makes them vulnerable to the exigencies of real life. Reality, as Schwartz happily reminds us, must win in the end. Unfortunately, this never happens as quickly as one would like, or as entirely as one might hope. In this regard, *Society Against Itself* is also a call to arms.