

## **Oberlin College Individual Major Proposal**

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**Other Majors:** None

\* I do wish to be present when the Committee considers my proposal.

\* I am willing to advise other 1M students.

\* I agree to allow my proposal to be read by other students.

**Title of Proposed Major:** Community and Critical Resistance Studies

I. Primary Rationale

II. Course Rationale

III. Grid Sheets

IV. Faculty Advisors:

A.G. Miller, Religion

Signature:

Steve Volk, History

Signature:

## Community and Critical Resistance Studies

### Individual Major Proposal

#### Primary Rationale

#### **Introduction**

This individual major is a program of study designed to explore the idea that people need each other in order to make the world a better place. By living in such a way as to maintain strong connections with one another and with the world, people become more aware of oppression and conflict and are better able to work to resist it and create peace. This major will explore the best ways to do so. Human history has been a series of political, moral and religious struggles by human beings to improve their situation and that of others. By this is meant not the traditional capitalistic race for more money, bigger cars and better things, but people's search for community and justice, even when this search defies the status quo. Since the beginning of our history people have sought out others of our kind for warmth, security and company, and it is only in fairly recent history, in the Western world, that nuclear families have begun to isolate themselves from extended relatives, from friends and neighbors. This social structure, as accepted and encouraged within the capitalist value system of profit..": and productivity, goes against human nature: it is divisive and unsustainable. This system perpetuates violence from the top down and across various inner strata by isolating people from one another and portraying life as a game in which the object is to win. Victory (improvement of one's own life and status) / comes often at the expense of others. As our society has increasingly trumpeted the virtues of the American Dream of a suburban home, two cars and two children, it has moved away from respect for diversity, concern for individual needs, and affirmation of life. As a result, movements for positive social change have attempted to challenge these norms and create alternatives, their members often living in communal settings in order to resist the status quo, and support and learn from each other. A community of individuals is, therefore, a concept distinct from either family or the larger ideal of nation: it is, in this context, a group of any size that shares a vision of the way things should be and a commitment to working to realize that vision, as well as one to supporting and challenging each member of the group intellectually, emotionally, and spiritually. Through war and peace, in nonviolent as well as militant ways, with varying degrees of success and failure, people have used organized forms of resistance, ranging from letter-writing and neighborhood outreach to property destruction, civil disobedience, and strikes, to better their own lives as well as others', and to express their outrage at oppressive systems interested only in the good of the few. In this, they have often found that one cannot do this work in isolation, rather only in community with the help of others, with a support system that is intended to push each individual, as well as the whole group, to live in the most life-affirming way possible. Community implies a collective search for meaning, a continual and purposeful study of our world and other people, and a giving of one's life to one's belief system. This belief system, generally shared by a community, is that of a better world for all.

Maria Montessori, the innovative educator, once said that "Peace is the work of educators. All politicians can do is keep us out of war." At the beginning of the 21st century, in an age more militarized and desensitized to violence, poverty and oppression than any we have ever known, Oberlin College, as a socially and politically progressive institution, has a responsibility to this work. However, no major at Oberlin professes or attempts to provide an academic foundation for a life of action, a life of "respect for the individual and active concern for the larger society" as expressed in the College mission statement. This major is designed to do so, through critical examination of the concepts of community and resistance and the consequences of their interaction. The conclusions I will draw from the coursework required by this major will be integral in my decisions about my own needs for community and resistance in a life such as this.

### **Goals and Themes**

Courses in history, politics and religion form the backbone of this major. The history classes I plan to take are necessary for an understanding of past conflicts between those in power and those they oppress. History explores the various means used by the oppressors to remain in power and those used by the resisters' to challenge that power. The Politics department and its study of political developments institutions, and movements are key to an understanding of current theories and priorities in government policy, as well as of the reactions they bring about in the general population. Both departments provide, to a lesser extent, methodologies that may aid in making predictions about future political, social and economic trends; however, my primary concern as it relates to this major is the study of existing accounts and analyses. To learn about religions, theologies, and spiritualities is to explore the motivations behind and philosophies supporting the struggles of the oppressed against power, the bonds formed between different individuals and groups with various goals, and the vision, faith and inspiration necessary for the continuation of these struggles. Though organized religion often loses sight of these progressive tendencies in an effort to maintain hierarchy and the comfort of "tradition," the revolutionary and transcendent potential and the communal nature of faith are key to the struggles at the center of this major.

Specifically, I see classes from these departments as creating an interaction crucial for the struggle my major recognizes and aims to further: a synthesis between the emphasis I see in politics and history on facts and on the study of "the way things are" and the attention towards the future that prevails in my experience of religious and faith-based studies - the ability to, indeed the necessity of, controlling our own destiny. Both views are necessary yet incomplete. This major will attempt to draw out and learn from the most progressive aspects of each discipline while analyzing the forces behind any tendencies they show to suppress or ignore work for positive social change.

To the extent that I include courses from departments other than the three mentioned above, I do so because they offer information and/ or tools to further this struggle, such as expanded communication skills, a better understanding of "human nature," or a wider variety of

methodologies with which to examine the questions relevant to my major. These questions include ones of morality and self-interest, the origins of common "isms" and prejudices in our society, and the role of nonviolence, violence and community in the inspiration and sustenance of struggles against injustice, war and oppression, struggles for peace, freedom and truth. These are questions that span and draw from many of the social sciences and humanities. I consider these disciplines to be at the core of my major because these three approaches combine with each other to form a comprehensive analysis of why and how existing political, social and moral institutions and trends have come to be. Together, they look towards perpetuating that in our society, which is just, and humane, and creating alternatives to that which is oppressive and hurtful.

Oberlin, College offers no courses that take into account all the facts, assumptions, and hopes outlined in my major proposal, but many that explore ' one aspect or another. I feel my major, as well as the school overall would. benefit from an Introduction to Peace Studies or, Theory of Nonviolence course in order to pre-empt many of the theory and survey courses I will be taking, but in the absence of that offering I have explored similar courses and programs at other schools, including Mount Holyoke, Swarthmore, Northland and Goucher Colleges. (Underline ours – ExCo 180) I have attempted, where relevant, to incorporate concepts central to their offerings into my course choices in order to gain breadth and focus. My goal in the next very short five semesters is to gain as broad and varied an exposure to these classes, which include not only those required for my major, but others I plan to take in addition, as possible. A friend recently said to me that one of her hopes for her time at Oberlin is to take those classes that will help her to be a better person, and though I think most classes can further a student's self-improvement in one way or another, the reasoning behind this major is that I think it will point me more decisively towards consciously choosing justice and truth over silence and complicity than any other.

## **Conclusion**

A major in Community and Critical Resistance Studies will provide me with a culturally, historically, and politically comprehensive liberal arts education, as well as with the ability to think, read, and write critically about important social and political issues. It will help me to be more aware of the world around me and of other people's needs and should deepen my commitment to functioning, both independently and in group or communal settings, as a sensitive, thoughtful individual focused on opposing injustice and violence in all forms.

## Community and Critical Resistance Studies

### Individual Major Proposal

#### Secondary Rationale

#### **I. Course work already completed (in transcript order)**

##### 1. **History 223:** Ethnic Minorities in Central Europe

This course explored the struggles of marginalized people in central Europe to retain their own identities and dignities under the rule of the majority, the Germanic peoples in power. It was an important introduction for me not only into Central and Eastern European culture and history but into the ways in which oppressed peoples have historically bonded together and fought assimilation.

##### 2. **Religion 206:** Ancient Judaism from the Exile to the Rise of the Rabbis

I took Judaism because I wanted to know more about the history of the Judeo-Christian tradition as a basis for radical nonviolent witness as I have known it most of my life. It provided a basis for me in the Old Testament scriptures as well as an important perspective on the life of the Jews as they grappled with their faith and their sense of community through exile, enslavement and oppression. This struggle continues today and is as relevant as it was then.

##### 3. **Dance 271:** Queer Acts.

This class may seem unrelated to the primary ideas expressed by my major proposal, but I found it to be full of amazing insights into contemporary problems of gender, ethnicity, sexuality/and cultural identity. Readings for the class about the work of queer people towards equality and acceptance, but not assimilation, were inspirational and horizon-broadening for me. The class was also valuable and relevant to me in that it improved my communication skills with peers on sensitive subjects and taught me about the need for open dialogue about our bodies and our feelings in order to not allow the silence about who we are as human beings to continue.

##### 4. **English 148:** Pedagogies of Empire

Until the rise of the United States to superpower status, the British Empire was long the main military, economic, and political force in the world, and as such a power committed many acts of tyranny and imperialism. This course explored the motivations behind Britain's and France's actions, particularly in India, Africa and the Caribbean, and the responses of colonized peoples. It provided an overview into the history of these areas and the ways in which people in colonized countries were able to resist and transcend their colonization.

##### 5. **Politics 239:** Marxist Theory

As with Christianity, in my experience, Marxism and various forms of socialism have influenced social justice activists on many levels. I was interested in learning more about Marx, Engels, and those that came after and thought along the same lines of capitalist/worker, oppressor/oppressed, and subject/ object. Marxist thought outlines a clear path to revolution and a "dictatorship of the proletariat," which, while it does not provide for the role of nonviolent resistance as much as I would personally like, often seems too-long awaited and a viable goal. More than a push toward revolution, however, reading Marx reminded me of the workers' side of the story, which is a long tradition of marginalization

and stolen rights: a motivation to create coalitions against a corrupt system.

#### 6. **Politics 995:** Organizing Dynamics

This private reading integrated many of my personal beliefs with current interests of mine as to the nuts and bolts of grassroots organizing and social interactions among activists. I interviewed other activists about their tactics and opinions about group dynamics and the most effective ways to work for change. I consider it very closely related to the main questions of my major in that activists must continually question themselves, their relationships and connections, their tactics and beliefs in order to remain au courant and informed, in order to have any influence over public opinion or institutions.

## **II. Courses to be taken (in proposed order)**

### 1. **History 255:** Rioters, Rebels and Revolutionaries

The title of this course immediately appealed to me because my major is: interested in the stories of those people who have resisted the status quo: people who have gone against what was socially, politically, culturally, or religiously acceptable in favor of what they felt was right. The rioters and rebels ,this course . plans to study are the people who have made change in this country and who have kept the idea of" democracy" alive thus far, and therefore the :subjects of' my main interest. The class is also interested in the distinctions between the three terms that make up its title, and I think an understanding of the separation between and common elements of these three things is essential to preparations for future resistance.

### 2. **Religion 282:** Survey of American Christianity

The activist tradition in which I have been raised is very Catholic and very . alternative, though those two things may seem contradictory. I feel the need to know more about the ways in which other strands of Christianity have worked for justice, especially in this country, and followed their hearts to the word of God.

### \*2. **Religion 216:** Christian Utopias and Communitarian Movements

My major deals with the hopes and visions for a better world of citizens from all walks of life. However, my own background is a nonviolent Christian anti-war resistance community. Though I have been brought up in this sphere, I know little of other similarly oriented movements. I hope this course will provide me with an understanding of the common goals of these other communities as well as advantages they offer their members, positive changes they have brought, and obstacles in their way.

### 3. **History 241:** Living with the Bomb

I consider the atomic bomb and the use of nuclear weapons one of the greatest evils one people has ever committed against another. This course is about the bomb and the moral, ideological and historical issues it has brought up for people especially in the United States and Japan but also all around the world since. I think taking this class will help me in my understanding of the motivations behind building and using a weapon such as the atom bomb, as well as the complexity of such a tremendous breakdown in communication as a war, and perhaps as a class we will develop insights as to how such breakdowns can be avoided in the future.

### 4. **Politics 227:** War, Weapons and Arms Control

This major focuses in large part on the problems caused by militarism and war making. Therefore, an understanding of the motivations behind the decision to build, trade or use weapons or to make war on another country is crucial to a movement that works to change hearts and minds into ones faithful to nonviolence in all aspects of life.

**\*4. Politics 216: Political Economy of Advanced Capitalism**

Many peace activists in the 20th century have become convinced that much of the violence in the current social, economic and political systems of the United States in particular but of the world's most powerful countries in general is caused by capitalism and its never-ending drive for profit over human rights. Therefore an exploration of the political and economical motivations for a capitalist system will help its students develop ideas as to the benefits and disadvantages of, as well as more life-affirming alternatives to, such systems.

**5. Religion 284: African American Religious History**

In addition to the civil rights movement, struggles for peace and justice in this country in the 20th century have benefited and learned immensely from African American activists. The nonviolence and loving determination inherent in the bus boycotts, lunch counter sit-ins, and school integration fights is inspiring and has had a lasting influence on American peace activism. This class will explore where the fight came from and how it continues.

**\*5. History 254: Radical Traditions**

I feel it's necessary to learn about history in order to ground oneself in the present and have a sense of what happens next. I expect this course will help me do just that. Its course description emphasizes the "forces that have united, divided, undermined, and transformed the American left." It is exactly these forces I wish to study in order to better understand the historical identity of the American left, where it is going, and how this is comparable to the development of leftist movements in other countries.

**6. Religion 208: New Testament and Christian Origins**

Having grown up strongly influenced by a leftist Catholic tradition which holds Jesus as one strong example for nonviolent thought and action, I am eager to learn more about mainstream views of his teachings, as well as the ways in which Jesus, as a historical as well as a spiritual figure, inspired the growth of a radical, communitarian form of Christianity that focused on resisting the oppression of the Roman Empire. An understanding of these dynamics will aid in analysis of the role of religion, specifically Christianity and Catholicism, in contemporary leftist activist traditions.

**\*6. Religion 218: Christian Thought and Action: Reformation and Modern**

In a continuation of my rationale for the class for which this one is intended as an alternate, the study of the role of Christianity in daily life, and especially in decision making, interests me as a mirror against which to hold up my own experience of the interactions between Biblical teachings and practical, everyday nonviolence and social justice work.

**7. Politics 214: Social Change and Political Transformation**

A class whose purpose is to examine the dynamics of how things change for the better seems too good to be true, but I expect it to focus as well on the reasons behind these changes, i.e. people's movements and socioeconomic trends influencing political

transformations. Class discussions will likely be helpful in determining key factors in the success of social movements.

**\*7. Politics 204: Political Inquiry: Investigations into Controversial Issues**

This class promises to investigate popular perceptions of controversial policy issues that address the root of key "isms" in this country and the violence they cause. I look forward to exploring the causes behind trends in widely held views' and the ways in which an oppressive system such as that of the United States' works to perpetuate those biases..

**8. History 357: Gandhi and Nonviolent Resistance.**

Gandhi, as a leader in 20th century nonviolent activism, is an essential figure with essential writings for anyone who wishes to engage in nonviolent direct action, or who would like to try to inspire others to do so.

**\*8. History 269: Nation of Joiners**

The tendency towards "volunteerism" as opposed to "activism" in recent years has interested me because it seems to get at the symptoms of the problem quite well, but never knows where to turn to address the problem causing the symptoms. I would hope in this class to learn more not only about more traditional types of social movements and joiners, but about ways in which people are inspired to do work for social justice and the reasons they choose the causes to which they devote their time.

**9. Sociology 354: Social Movements and Revolutionary Change**

The same basic explanation for the course above goes for this as well: I am interested in getting at the roots of the problem and so learning about the past and present state of social movements, and where they might go.

**10. Religion 339: Religion, War and Peace**

The description of this course seems to get at many of the questions my major asks, in addressing the interactions between religion and pacifism, or lack thereof. How can such an overtly religious country commit so many crimes against other nations and other people? Does organized religion really promote love of all people?

**\*10. History 405: Research Seminar in World War II**

World War II was arguably the most important political event in the 20th century, one that has shaped politics, culture, economics and the environment ever since. I feel that one can not have an understanding of war, international politics, or the arms race without extensive knowledge of World War II, and furthering my understanding of these issues is integral to the structure of the life I hope to live, the life I want my major to prepare me for. See also explanation #3, "Living with the Bomb."

**11. Topic Course: Theory and Practice of Nonviolence (see full description)**

## **Community and Critical Resistance Studies Individual Major Proposal** **Tentative Topic Course Description**

### **Theory and Practice of Nonviolence**

This topic course will be an intensive private reading aimed at identifying key ideologies, events, and figures in the history of nonviolent struggles and applying the lessons they bring to a life of social justice activism. I will concentrate my study initially on writings of and about nonviolent leaders commonly looked to today, including Jesus, later Catholic saints, Thoreau, Dorothy Day, Gandhi, Oscar Romero, Rosa Parks, James Lawson, and Ammon Hennacy. I will incorporate other resources as well, including investigation of research facilities such as Iliff School of Theology's Gandhi-Harner-King center and interview opportunities with nonviolent activists. This study, which will acknowledge and focus on women, leaders from Third World nations, and the role of minority groups in nonviolent struggles wherever possible, will enable me to form a clear picture of the development of the philosophy of nonviolence as a key element of any work for peace and justice.

Once grounded in the writings of those who consider nonviolence a way of life and an end, not a means, I would like to explore the viewpoints of those who see nonviolence as only a tactic to be used in certain circumstances, if at all. The use of nonviolence as a tactic has been a subject of much debate, particularly in the context of recent economic justice struggles around the world, as well as of wars for liberation and equality taking place in Latin America and elsewhere. I am specifically interested in the recent developments of an anarchist tactic known as the "Revolutionary Anti-Capitalist (Black) Bloc," which in some situations involves physical struggle with police or other representatives of the capitalist system it protests, and in the struggle of the Zapatista liberation army of Mexico. Both are tightly-knit groups with specific goals of positive social change, but neither falls easily into this major's definition of a "community." In addition, South Africa's fight to free itself from apartheid fits into this framework, and I feel offers valuable perspective on nonviolence and revolutionary freedom struggles. Through research on these three movements I would like to explore the dynamics of the contrasts between two perspectives: of militant resistance to an oppressive system and of nonviolent opposition and civil disobedience in the face of systematic violence. Many white pacifists in the United States acknowledge their privilege in singing and blockading and getting media coverage for their actions, in going to jail for their beliefs instead of dying, especially in comparison to indigenous peoples in Latin America for whom the term "free speech" has never even been relevant. The tactics they must use to get their point across often come not only from moral convictions, but from a survival instinct: fight or be killed. Thus, I think nonviolent activists in the more "democratic" nations are aware to an extent that they are privileged to be able to protest in the ways that they do; yet, where does a guerrilla war by an indigenous people against a highly trained government force fall into a philosophy of nonviolence? What is the role of community in a movement not committed to nonviolence? I am of the opinion that most of the activists with whom I have come into contact, and with whom I am likely to work, have not sufficiently engaged with their own questions of where the line should be.

I am a pacifist and believe in nonviolence, both as a tactic and as a way of life, but have never had this identity challenged by a situation in which I would be forced to fight or surrender my life or the life of someone I love, or my home or land or country. What would I do? This

private reading is intended to help me engage more critically with this question, through the writings of activists on both sides of the question, and position myself more firmly in order to increase my preparedness for different situations that will arise in the life I choose to lead.

Signed by Prof. A. G. Miller 4/16/2001