



Credit: Elisheva Horowitz

Contents

Preface	ix
<i>Richard Landes</i>	
Introduction	1
<i>Asaf Romirowsky</i>	
Andrew Pessin's Facebook Post during Operation Protective Edge	5
Condensed Timeline	8
PART ONE	
When Criticizing Hamas Became a Campus Hate Crime	17
<i>Richard Landes</i>	
<hr/>	
1 The Post: On Truth and Metaphor	19
2 The Shameful Dishonesty of It All: An Annotated Chronology from the Perspective of the Victim	34
3 The People: McCarthyism, New London Style	72
PART TWO	
Studies in Pessinology	97
<hr/>	
4 Connecticut College Acts Out a Staged Emergency	99
<i>Ashley Thorne</i>	
5 "I Was Rude, You Were Evil": Reflections on Academia, Liberalism, and the Betrayal of Andrew Pessin	114
<i>John Gordon</i>	
6 The Pessin Case: The Response of Jewish Colleagues	138
<i>Fred Baumann</i>	

PART THREE**Reflections: Salem on the Thames—Stampeding a Herd of Cats 171***Richard Landes*

7 What Connecticut College's Andrew Pessin Affair Teaches Us	173
8 Reflections on Academia and Freedom: The Case of Connecticut College, Spring 2015	186
9 Pessin, Ironic Prophet: The Liberal Emperor's New Clothes of Humanitarian Racism	195
Bibliography	201

Preface

RICHARD LANDES

I first met Andrew Pessin as a result of his ordeal at Connecticut College in the Spring of 2015. As soon as I heard about it in the national media, it struck me as ominous: Professor with Zionist sympathies ridden out of his community on an ideological rail, tarred and feathered with accusations of hate speech, by a coalition of “progressives” with a Muslim student and Muslim professor leading the attack. After speaking with him and reading the material I made available at my blog, and analyze here, it became clear this was a major study in the failure of what one might call the cultural Maginot Line against fascism.¹

At the same time, it’s been important for me to imagine Andrew before I met him, before his colleagues threw him under the social-justice juggernaut, back in the good old days when he was still riding high. Here one finds a remarkably gifted and versatile individual, a great teacher and colleague, a sharp thinker with a finely tuned sense of the sound and the absurd, and a talented, insightful, novelist. He was in every sense, a local star, who appeared on David Letterman, the author, among other things of *The 60-Second Philosopher: Expand Your Mind on a Minute or so a Day!*, and *Uncommon Sense: The Strangest Ideas from the Smartest Philosophers*. Just in sheer intellectual terms, Connecticut College, in their rush to judgment, trashed a rare resource, and deprived the larger community of an important, creative voice. Who knows, for some that may have been the point.

I wrote this based on materials given to me by Pessin and others, in order to represent what was not made available. It describes what happened, in detail, from his perspective. Given that his perspective was precisely what no

1 For further examples specifically documenting attacks on Israel-supporters, see *Anti-Zionism on Campus: The University, Free Speech and BDS*, ed. Andrew Pessin and Doron Ben-Atar (Bloomington ID: Indiana University Press, 2018). There are, of course, wide ranging examples of non-Israel related incidents. See chapter by Ashley Thorne in this volume.

one of consequence allowed to become known at the time, even as his college community was putting Pessin through a terrifying ordeal, it seemed most valuable—and fair—to expose the Connecticut College community to what they had done, viewed through the eyes of its victim. It is my fervent hope that this book will be available at the ConnColl bookstore, and widely read on campus. How often do we get the opportunity to read the voice of our unjust victim?

At a certain point, Andrew and I stopped talking about these matters in any detail. I assumed he signed an agreement with his university that forbade him, some kind of non-disclosure agreement. Given that he was simultaneously dealing with deeply troubling personal and family matters (to be identified in what follows), I could hardly begrudge him having given up the right to talk about what had happened in order to have the breathing room to recover. So as the detailed conversations we had previously had ceased, I realized I was on my own. Naturally when I began to work on this book I invited him to contribute to it. I was not entirely surprised when he politely declined.

As I wrote, I tried to avoid getting too close to the players. I don't, for example, know who is who, between A, B, C, and D, in the Philosophy department. After initially trying to reach the Dean and the President without success, I have not sought to turn this into a piece of investigative journalism. Consider these the reflections of a medievalist, who pieces together a picture from fragmentary evidence. In this case, the evidence (see Pessin Archive) seems overwhelming in favor of Pessin's reading, with very few anomalies from the "other side" to challenge this plain meaning. Any closer, more personal investigation would mean fieldwork in pervasive cognitive dissonance and "self-justifying retrospective narratives" that proliferate as a result (e.g., p. 59f.). Enough and too much.

By the standards of moral and intellectual integrity that have, over the past five centuries, created the modern social miracle of academia, i.e. an institutional framework built around speaking freely, this was a shameful episode. No one behaved well, not even Pessin. Bluntly put, the Connecticut College community was put to a major moral test in the Spring of 2015, and it failed miserably. It's not often one can make a case study of such a "cross-the-boards" failure, a kind of "Emperor's New Clothes" scenario. They certainly deserve close examination.

But rather than revel in the moral degradation of people we criticize, we need to reflect on the larger, more specific but less personal themes: whence the cowardice—individual and, so astonishingly, collective? Why the failures? What the rationalizations? Granted, when I first spoke to Pessin back in April of

2015, he was angry and wanted to settle scores; and I shared his sense of grievance. But I was always amazed at Pessin's remarkably kind personality, his willingness to empathize with people who had wronged and betrayed him, to cut many people, even Khandaker, slack. He wanted his righteousness back more than he wanted to punish those who took it from him. Honor vengeance is not in his bones.

So, in writing, I preferred to present the case in all its gory intellectual detail, not sparing some of the more egregious behavior (attackers, philosophy faculty, top administrators), but trying to avoid as much as possible, specific personalities. If this incident is to teach us anything, it is as analysis, not gossip or score settling. If in the process of keeping my distance, I have gotten people "wrong," described them inaccurately, even made mistakes about their actions and the course of events, I apologize and welcome substantive correction to the record. On the other hand, I am fairly certain that no unfair damage I may do to them comes anywhere near the unfair damage they did to their colleague, Andrew Pessin.

On Martin Luther King Jr. Day, 2019, an exchange happened at the Washington Mall, between some Catholic High School students, some wearing MAGA hats, and at least two "constituencies" present—a group of Black Hebrew Israelites, and a group of Native Americans. Video footage appeared showing a student wearing a MAGA hat, smiling at a native elder. Framed with a narrative which identified the smile as a taunt aimed at the elder, the brief video went viral, inciting a wave of horrified outrage from various figures—including in the highest levels of public discourse—some of which bordered on hate speech. Reza Aslan, the Muslim religious scholar, tweeted a photo with the question, "Have you ever seen a more punchable face than this kid's?" A pop culture contributing writer at Vulture magazine, spoke of "the hysterical rage, nausea, and heartache this makes me feel. I just want these people to die. Simple as that. Every single one of them. And their parents."²

And, it turns out, this was yet another staged emergency into which good people jumped with both feet. The larger video evidence, while not decisive in any way, and often inaudible, does not support the narrative that so incensed so many. In this nationwide case, the corrections came quickly, much faster than with Pessin. Even progressive publications addressed the worrisome signs

2 John Levine, "Vulture Writer Who Wished Death on Covington Students Fired From Job at INE Entertainment," *The Wrap*, January 21, 2019; <https://www.thewrap.com/vulture-writer-on-covington-students-i-just-want-these-people-to-die-simple-as-that/>.

of online bullying and misinformation, and the disturbing nature of a trigger-happy moral outrage.³ And yet, others persisted in believing what the video had shown them.

The visceral dynamics that smashed into Andrew Pessin's intellectual career in the spring of 2015 are still with us, if anything, immensely exacerbated by the advent of the Trump administration. Americans/Westerners increasingly inhabit narrative camps so at odds with each other, that we have internalized the clash of civilizations. "My side, right or wrong; the other side cannot be right." For some, the fact that these students supported Trump put them beyond the pale, and made them the villains of any tale one could possibly tell; for others, the students could only be innocent victims.

That's what empiricism is supposedly for, why "due process" is fair, why reasoning from evidence counts. It's what permits us not to demonize each other and fall into the widening gyres of war and devastation. It's what makes democracy possible. I publish this collection of writings, then, above all as a guide to avoiding this madness of our times, and as an opportunity to turn to sanity through honest analysis. Ultimately, only honest self-criticism can make the difference.

James Fallows, at the end of his careful analysis of the "Confrontation at the Mall," quotes C. S. Lewis on the key issue: how does one respond to evidence that the "other guy" was not as bad as he or she at first seemed:

Suppose one reads a story of filthy atrocities in the paper. Then suppose that something turns up suggesting that the story might not be quite true, or not quite so bad as it was made out. Is one's first feeling, "Thank God, even they aren't quite so bad as that," or is it a feeling of disappointment, and even a determination to cling to the first story for the sheer pleasure of thinking your enemies are as bad as possible?

If it is the second then it is, I am afraid, the first step in a process which, if followed to the end, will make us into devils. You see, one is beginning to wish that black was a little blacker. If we give that wish its head, later on we shall wish to see grey as black, and then to see white itself as black. Finally,

3 Conors Friedersdorf, "Social-Media Outrage Is Collapsing Our Worlds," *Atlantic*, January 22, 2019; <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2019/01/outrage/579553/>. Caitlin Flanagan, "The Media Botched the Covington Catholic Story: And the damage to their credibility will be lasting," *Atlantic*, January 23, 2019; https://www.theatlantic.com/amp/article/581035/?__twitter_impression=true.

we shall insist on seeing everything—God and our friends and ourselves included—as bad, and not be able to stop doing it: we shall be fixed for ever in a universe of pure hatred.⁴

At ConnColl in the Spring of 2015, hatred won out, and Pessin was sacrificed, as have been many others before and since. In the 2020s, can we turn this around? Let us begin by offering those who were every bit as bad as they seemed, the participants in the hate-fest, the opportunity to rethink what they did.

I have structured the book as follows:

- 1) In Part I, I present
 - a. a chapter on the exegetical issue, perhaps more detailed than most readers would normally read, but one that lies at the heart of the intellectual travesties involved.
 - b. A long annotated chronology that tells the story as it happened, with annotations concerning Pessin's point of view.
 - c. A discussion of the key actors in the drama, not as specific individuals, but as (self-fashioned) caricatures—the post-colonial Muslim scholar of Islam, the SJP inspired Muslim student, the radical left revolutionaries, students and profs, the administrators and faculty trying to virtue-signal their commitment to social justice.
- 2) The reflections of a number of the people involved in this incident, or well enough informed to shed important light on what happened.
 - a. Ashley Thorne puts the Pessin Affair in the context of “staged emergencies,” or moral panics that seize campuses and impose a moral discourse which mass shames and excludes certain targeted, ideologically deviant figures.
 - b. John Gordon, a professor at ConnColl on the verge of retirement, who defended Pessin, reflects on both the astonishing nature of his colleague's responses, and on the broader academic betrayal of the kind of progressive concerns that engaged so many of us in the '60s and '70s.
 - c. Fred Baumann, a secular Jewish colleague at another university, analyzes the response of Pessin's (largely Jewish) colleagues in the

4 James Fallows, “Confrontation at the Mall,” *Atlantic*, January 21, 2019; <https://www.theatlantic.com/notes/2019/01/imagining-injustices-confrontation-mall/580888/>.

Philosophy Department and more broadly the Jews on campus to the events, interrogating their (often unspoken, occasionally denied) awareness that these events and their responses match so many earlier cases of hostility: “Sacrificing one’s own for the larger good, namely continued tolerance [to the rest of the Jews] by a hostile ruling authority, is a tough choice, but sometimes it may have to be made.”

- d. Three pieces by me, including a talk I gave at Connecticut College in the fall of 2015.

Introduction

ASAF ROMIROWSKY

This compelling volume focuses on the story of *Andrew Pessin*, a tenured philosophy professor at Connecticut College, who became a target for anti-Israel students and faculty, as a result of a Facebook post he published during Israel's 2014 war in Gaza (known as Operation Protective Edge), on the actions of the Islamist-terrorist group Hamas.

Pessin was attacked by one of his own students, an SJP leader, who accused him of having “directly condoned the extermination of a people,” based on a deliberate misreading of Pessin’s Facebook post. The accusation, however, swayed both students and colleagues, and Pessin soon found himself the object of a witch-hunt, in which his attackers accused the administration of “institutional racism” for not firing him. His isolation and vulnerability were intensified by the school’s small size—almost 1,900 students and about 200 faculty.

Overall, the Pessin affair is emblematic of a growing and insidious trend in academia today. College campuses have become platforms for those who disparage Israel, as seen in the different human rights, anti-globalization, and anti-imperialism groups that have adopted the Palestinian cause. But as with the rise of Nazism in the 1930s, the hateful, conspiratorial view of malevolent Jews and (now) Israel, propounded by the far left and by radical Islam, has become the core of a new anti-Semitism, which has gained a shocking traction in the academy.

These trends have been magnified as a result of identity politics, which has clouded reality and prevented younger generations from distinguishing between facts and opinions. Indeed, thanks to the intensity of feelings that cannot—must not—be questioned, opinions have become facts. The Pessin story exemplifies this process, especially in the way his attackers pressured the school to endorse their identity-based feelings and views as reality.

To those who embrace progressive identity-politics, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict embodies every ailment of Western society, especially as it relates to that Western invention, “human rights.” The Palestinian cause, already become a cause célèbre of the humanities and social sciences in the late twentieth century under the influence of Edward Saïd’s post-colonial denunciation of “Orientalism,” has become the main focus of the wildly successful identity politics of the twenty-first century. Thus, anyone sympathetic towards Israel breaks the post-colonial rules.

Supporters of Israel and Israelis themselves have little to no chance of getting a fair or dispassionate hearing or treatment in the academic arena. Pessin, for example, was outflanked by people who claimed to represent academic freedom (to say what they feel) while silencing Pessin for his “hateful” speech. So strong was this dynamic, that both the administration (president on down) and Pessin’s fellow (identified) Jews still on campus urged him *not* to defend himself and his post from the misrepresentations of his attackers, *lest he anger them further*. Catch-22.

The modern notions of free speech and academic freedom flow from John Stuart Mill’s *On Liberty*, which argued that free speech originates in society’s desire to discover the truth, and it therefore must tolerate a wide range of opinion. By suppressing what may be a correct opinion (e.g., germ theory), society loses the opportunity to exchange an error for truth. But banning a false opinion, Mill maintained, also means losing something almost as precious—a clearer perception of truth that is produced by its clash with error. If no foes are available to put one’s ideas to the test, Mill urges inventing arguments against one’s own beliefs.

But post-modern academia has dispensed with such tests of its own beliefs: in the name of a concern for the feelings of all those “marginalized and under-represented voices” that cry out to be heard, it suppresses the often empirically solid claims of one side as unacceptably offensive, and privileges the emotional reactions of the other, however offensive, as a new kind of factual reality.

The Pessin Affair presents a case study of the clear lack of balance in current academic discussions concerning the conflict now taking place in the area from “the River to the Sea.” So-called scholarship has been replaced by propaganda, which studiously avoids examining, much less condemning, terrorism or jihadism. Such an atmosphere enables intolerable ideas to become accepted as norms, and marginalizes sane responses of disapproval. No scholar, apparently, wants his colleagues calling him a racist Orientalist and an Islamophobe.

Today, those identifying as activist scholars in North America and Europe insist—as does Jeremy Corbyn—that comparing Israel to Nazi Germany and accusing her of genocide against the Palestinian people, is legitimate criticism (it *feels* right), and not anti-Semitism (the Livingstone Formulation). Any supporter of Israel who objects to this twenty-first-century avatar of anti-Semitism is racist and just trying to silence the legitimate criticism. As Israeli diplomat Abba Eban noted when the first accusations that Zionism=Racism hit the UN in 1975:

There is no difference whatever between antisemitism and the denial of Israel's statehood. Classical antisemitism denies the equal right of Jews as citizens within society. Anti-Zionism denies the equal rights of the Jewish people its lawful sovereignty within the community of nations. The common principle in the two cases is discrimination.

As the popularity of the boycott movement's crusade against Israel has grown, some American Jews on the left have joined forces with this effort to place their fellow Jewish Zionists beyond the pale, as people who cannot/should not be debated due to their abominable views. Moreover, an insidious double standard is applied: Jewish organizations like Hillel must include anti-Israel voices or be deemed intolerant or racist; whereas no one demands that the pro-Palestinian side hear any Zionist voices. Thus "good" Jews should engage in dialogue with BDS representatives or other Palestinian advocates no matter how extreme their demand (e.g., the ethnic cleansing of Israel), but no BDS advocates should have to listen to "bad" Jews, who defend Israel's actions and challenge the Palestinian narrative.

To even allow such a challenge would violate the "anti-normalization" demands of groups like the SJP and MSA, who insist that no Muslim or Arab engage in any way with poisonous Israelis or even Jews, lest it encourage compromise and co-existence, when "true justice" demands the restoration of a wholly Muslim Palestine. Even interfaith dialogues have been criticized. And now, a few leading American Jewish intellectuals have adopted the rhetoric and methods of BDS—moral outrage at unacceptable pronouncements, against normalization with those so stigmatized—but they apply it only to their own (bad) fellow Jews. Heaven forbid they should express disapproval of Palestinian statements or deeds.

Pessin's experience conforms to a wider pattern on North American campuses where pro-Palestinian sympathizers, whose ranks include some


prominent Jews, have abused the collective memory of the Holocaust. They have broken Cynthia Ozick's cardinal rule that "Jews are not metaphors—not for poets, not for novelists, not for theologians, not for murderers, and never for anti-Semites. ..." They have dismissed anyone who invokes the Holocaust to defend Israel as "Holocaust-consumed," and then turn Israelis into the new Nazis. Historically, Jews have been subjected to segregation, ostracism, and boycotts; indeed, the boycott movement is only the latest avatar of this millennia-long hate fest. Those sponsoring it are more interested in hurting Israel (and its supporters), if not obliterating it altogether, than in promoting human rights. Were it otherwise, they would be demanding boycotts of the numerous Middle Eastern dictatorships that are guilty of the genuinely horrendous atrocities against their own peoples. But then, how many times have the streets of European capitals filled with indignant progressives, enraged at the massacres of civilians in Syria, Iraq, and Sudan?

Pessin was not the first, nor will he be the last, victim of the SJP and BDS. And academic discourse in the public sphere will continue to degenerate under the demands of identity-politics, not only where Israel is concerned, but across a wide spectrum of issues and fields in the social "sciences" and the humanities.

This book, however, is dedicated to turning the Pessin Affair into a turning point. By studying the affair in its painful (and to the ConnColl community, deeply shameful) detail, anyone interested in the health of the public sphere in the West in the twenty-first century can learn much about how a travesty like the one that occurred during the Spring semester of 2015 at Connecticut College could have happened, and what we all need to do, in individual and institutional ways, to stem this tide of intellectual disintegration. It may take courage, but at least it need not take shedding blood to stand up for intellectual and moral integrity.

Andrew Pessin's Facebook Post during Operation Protective Edge


Andrew Pessin, Professor of Philosophy at Connecticut College, August 11, 2014, Facebook entry later taken down in the face of misinterpretation, transcribed by me. Includes comment section, lost when Pessin took down the post, restored from a screen shot later.

**Andrew Pessin**
August 11, 2014 · 🌐

I'm sure someone could make a cartoon of this, but one image which essentializes the current situation in Gaza might be this. You've got a rabid pit bull chained in a cage, regularly making mass efforts to escape. The owner, naturally, keeps the thing in the cage, but being kind-hearted or something regularly feeds it, waters it, takes care of its health needs, etc. But the liberal hearted world is outraged at the cruelty of keeping it in the cage, keeps pressuring the owner to let it out. Every so often the man relents under the pressure, opens the cage a crack, and the pit bull comes roaring bounding out, snarling, going for the throat. A short battle ensues, the pit bull gets put back in and almost immediately liberal world pressure starts complaining about the cruelty to animals and insisting he open the cage

Gaza is in the cage because of its repeated efforts to destroy Israel and Jews. (1990s suicide buses anyone? how quickly we forget.) The blockade is not the cause of the current conflict. It is the RESULT of the conflict and cannot retroactively become its cause. The same is true of Judea and Samaria, the result of the Arab enmity toward Israel and not its cause. Anyone who fails to recognize that clear and obvious fact is demanding the release of a rabid pit bull. You may call for this release because you are yourself a rabid pit bull protesting your co-specimen's detention, or because you are a well-meaning liberal hearted animal rights person. But you are demanding the same thing. (And I wonder how heartily you'd demand this if the rabid pit bull was to be released in YOUR neighborhood.)

Like · Share

 5 people like this.

☐ View 6 more comments

I'm sure someone could make a cartoon of this, but one image which essentializes the current situation in Gaza might be this. You've got a rabid pit bull chained in a cage, regularly making mass efforts to escape. The owner, naturally keeps the thing in the cage, but being kind-hearted or something, regularly feeds it, waters it, takes care of its health needs, etc. But liberal hearted world is outraged at the cruelty of keeping in in the cage, keeps pressuring the owner to let it out. Every so often the man relents under pressure, opens the cage a crack, and the pit bull comes roaring bounding out, snarling, going for the throat. A short battle ensues, the pit bull gets put back in ... and almost immediately liberal world pressure starts complaining about the cruelty to animals and insisting he open the cage.

Gaza is the cage because of its repeated efforts to destroy Israel and the Jews. (1990s suicide buses anyone? how quickly we forget.) The blockade is not the cause of the current conflict. It is the RESULT of the conflict and cannot retroactively become its cause. The same is true of Judea and Samaria, the result of the Arab enmity toward Israel and not its cause. Anyone who fails to recognize that clear and obvious fact is demanding the release of a rabid pit bull. You may call for this release because you are yourself a rabid pit bull protesting your co-specimen's detention, or because you are a well-meaning liberal hearted animal rights person. But you are demanding the same thing. (And I wonder how heartily you'd demand this if the rabid pit bull was to be released in YOUR neighborhood.)

Comments:

Nicole ***: Wasn't too keen on your metaphor as I think a dog like that should be put down. But I understand your point and it's all true. They can't be trusted and that why there's blockades. Terrorists should be put down as well, just like the dog. August 11, 2014 at 3:38 am

Andrew Pessin: I agree nicole—but a lot of people out of (misplaced) kindness to the dog wouldn't put it down ... August 11, 2014 at 6:22 am

****: I like the metaphor. Perhaps to address Nicole's point, we can think of Gaza as a group of dogs in one cage. with most of them ***** possibly being healthy/nonviolent. Killing ALL of the dogs seems wrong, since there might be a healthy one in the bunch. August 11, 2014 at 9:08 am

Nicole ***: I said terrorists. I meant Hamas and not all Palestinians. August 11, 2014 at 9:08 am

****: Right, I know you weren't suggesting killing innocent Palestinians. My point is just that it's difficult to target terrorists when they are living among the innocent.

Condensed Timeline

Jan 22, 2015

Philosophy Professor Andrew Pessin participates in a public faculty panel discussing the Charlie Hebdo massacre earlier that month.

Jan 24

Student Lamiya Khandaker emails Pessin objecting to his Hebdo remarks.

Jan 25

Pessin replies to Khandaker. She did not respond.

Feb 2

Aparna Gopalan, the Opinions Editor of *The College Voice* (the student newspaper), publishes an editorial including criticism of Pessin's Hebdo remarks.

Feb 18, late

Khandaker emails Pessin again, this time objecting to his Facebook post from the previous summer (2014), claiming that it refers to Palestinians as "rabid [pit] bulls."

Feb 19

Pessin responds promising a more substantial response. Khandaker writes back at 10:01 am that she wasn't interested in any response he might make about his "political views."

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

Приобрести книгу можно

в интернет-магазине

«Электронный универс»

e-Univers.ru