

# Preface

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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.<sup>1</sup>

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

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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."<sup>2</sup>

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

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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.<sup>3</sup> 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,

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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](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.<sup>4</sup>

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

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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.