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Reflections on Academia and Freedom: The Case of Connecticut College, Spring 2015

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The views expressed in this paper are solely those of the author.

Spencer J. Pack

Introduction: “Reflections on Academia and Freedom: The Case of Connecticut College, Spring 2015 by Richard Landes”, 11/12/2015, Blaustein 210, Connecticut College, New London CT

Good evening; I am Spencer Pack, Professor of Economics and your moderator for this evening’s lecture by Professor Landes

According to Aristotle and Plato, Socrates used to complain that it was way too easy for out of town visitors to ingratiate themselves by praising Athenians in Athens. I don’t anticipate we will have that sort of problem tonight. Au contraire!

Economists refer to implicit contracts to mean that there are agreements between people which are taken for granted and for various reasons do not need to be and are not explicitly written down. In light of recent events at Connecticut College, and indeed around the country, I, sadly, need to state explicitly, what is implicit in gatherings of this sort.

These are tonight’s groundrules – our distinguished guest, Professor Landes will give a talk, followed by a question and answer period. Members of the audience will not yell out, shout, interrupt or heckle the speaker. During the q and a period, you will raise your hands and will respectfully ask your question and/or make a brief comment. I ask that anyone who feels they will not be able to abide by these normally implicit, now explicit Connecticut College rules, to please leave the room now.

Good.

Now, a brief word about our sponsors, the state and local chapters of the American Association of University Professors (AAUP).

The Connecticut College's Policies and Procedures: Information for Faculty, Administrators and Trustees states that the Board of Trustees in February 1950 endorsed the document of the AAUP on academic freedom. Moreover, the Board of Trustees, the faculty, and the administration endorse, as the basis of shared governance at Connecticut College, the 1966 AAUP Joint Statement on Government of Colleges and Universities.

As the AAUP recently wrote to its members:

“Higher education is under siege. Colleges and universities are struggling with huge fiscal problems. In addition, public institutions are facing mounting political pressures to confront issues like faculty productivity, assessment, accountability, and bottom-line budgeting. Your AAUP is deeply involved in these struggles and committed as always to preserving the faculty voice as these challenges are debated.”

The AAUP's website states that:

“Protecting academic freedom is the AAUP's core mission. Academic freedom is the indispensable requisite for unfettered teaching and research in institutions of higher education. As the academic community's core policy document states, ‘institutions of higher education are conducted for the common good and not to further the interest of

either the individual teacher or the institution as a whole. The common good depends upon the free search for truth and its free exposition””.

And that:

“Joining the AAUP says that you want to help shape the future of our profession. You want a voice in matters such as academic freedom, faculty governance, career issues, tenure, economic security for contingent faculty, and the overuse of contingent appointments.”

I strongly urge all faculty members to join the AAUP. While many of the differences among us are indeed great, our common interests in furthering the future of professors, Connecticut College, and higher education in the United States are ultimately far greater. The AAUP needs us; and we need the AAUP for its protection of faculty and indeed for helping guide the future of higher education for the betterment of all: including students, faculty, and, yes, even college administrators.

Now on to the main event.

The title of Professor Landes’ talk is

Threats to Academic Freedom in the Early 21st Century: Case Study of Connecticut College,

Spring 2015”.

Professor Landes was Professor of History at Boston University for many years. Longtime the Director of the Center for Millennial Studies at BU, Professor Landes received his Ph.D. in History from Princeton University, and also studied at Harvard University and the Ecole Normale Superieure. He is the author or editor of 8 books, the most recent being *Heaven on Earth: The Varieties of the Millennial Experience* (Oxford University Press, 2010), and edited with Stephen Katz, *The*

Paranoid Apocalypse: A Hundred Year Retrospective on the Protocols of the Elders of Zion. He is currently working on 2 new books: *While God Tarried: Demotic Millennialism from Jesus to the Peace of God, 33-1033*, and *They're so Smart because We're so Stupid: A Medievalist's Guide to the 21st Century*. The author of over 34 articles, Professor Landes is an expert on millennialism, the destructive as well as constructive aspects of religious and secular utopian thought, and the varieties of pre-modern, modern, and post-modern forms of anti-semitism. A father of a recent Connecticut College graduate, Professor Landes has closely followed the events at Connecticut College since last Spring semester with care and concern. Ladies and gentlemen, Professor Richard Landes.

**Reflections on Academia and Freedom:
The Case of Connecticut College, Spring 2015**
Richard Landes

Academics like to think of themselves as autonomous thinkers. As the old joke has it, trying to coordinate them is like trying to herd cats. The very principles of academia – literally the protected realm of free speech – including tenure, give professors enormous privileges, not only the right to speak their minds, but protection from retaliation of those in power whom they displease. Few members of even the most highly developed democracies enjoy such exceptional privileges of freedom to speak out, dissent, criticize, to speak truth to power with relative impunity. Try lining up such individuated folks and get them to all toe the line? Sooner try herding cats.

The very fact that Western democratic polities treasure such spaces, speaks volumes about their progressive bona fides: most power elites suffocate dissent. And in principle, that generous investment in a protected space of civil discourse where reasoning (if not Reason) prevails over violent passions, should guarantee some basic results. For example, at a time when [anonymous internet sociability can turn ominously feral](#), one might expect that academics and their institutions would resist such predatory crowd behavior. And surely, we might think, a small, cordial, college community, where the philosophy department champions an inclusive discourse that should make everyone feel “at home,” in the search for understanding our world would be the last place such predatory behavior would occur.

I'm here to make you feel uncomfortable. And so you should be, after your behavior of last semester. As a preface let me quote Proverbs: "He who loves reproof loves knowledge." Self-criticism is the lifeblood of the academy, the great strength of modern society, and core of a progressive world view: no self-criticism, no learning curve; and, alas, those incapable of self criticism need to blame someone else for failure, they need a scape goat, never mind that that victim is not responsible for their failings.

In that spirit, let me engage in some public self-criticism. When the CIA first formed after World War II, they sought out the advice of medievalists because, they reasoned, medievalists were trained to reconstruct a situation from fragmentary evidence. I'm a medievalist, and normally I try and reconstruct events so far back in history that no one I'm talking about can contradict me, and only my medieval colleagues can gainsay me. But today I engage in the most perilous act of reconstructing events here at the college and standing before those of you who know far better than I what happened. I've done my best to assemble the documents, and have them up at my blog [*The Augean Stables*](#).

But if, sometimes, we can see more because we know less, the forest for the trees as it were, there may be a number of ways in which I've gotten the story wrong, ways that I've misconstrued the behavior or motivations of the actors in the drama, that I've missed important elements. So before I begin giving you a hard time, let me say that I am open to your rebuke, to your challenges to my reconstruction of these events.

Let me begin with what you, the students, faculty and administration of Connecticut College, have done. On the basis of a systematically misrepresented Facebook post, some students and faculty accused Prof Andrew Pessin, of "directly condoning the extermination of a people... calling for the systematic abuse, killing, and hate of another people." This hateful statement, at least as far as one can tell from the outside, seems to have inspired a wave of condemnations of "hate speech," that issued in formal declarations from virtually every organization, department, program, desk, at Connecticut College. That list of formal declarations is still proudly posted at your university's website, many of which refer explicitly to his post and a couple of which identify him by name.

The claim was based on two things, 1) the ambiguity of the post's language; and 2) the spin given it by those who claimed deep injury at it's meaning. Given only the text and no further context "the situation in Gaza," which Pessin compared to a "rabid pit bull" *could* be the Palestinian people. And people might come to the conclusion that he meant, the Palestinian people, and that when, in his comment section he agreed with a certain Nicole, that the dogs should be put down, he refers to the Palestinian people.

Of course, in a world of scholarly integrity with an instinct for research, such shocking exegetical claims, which if true would indeed be most alarming, would be promptly scrutinized for corroborating evidence. More mature members of the community would have calmly examined the evidence, and, to use the fashionable term, problematized the accusatory reading, and questioned closely those making such grave accusations.

And, of course, the most elementary level of examination would have found the reading clearly negated by the evidence. A look at the larger Facebook discourse of Pessin's page concerning the situation in Gaza, which remained available unedited a month into the affair, until fear for his family's safety led him to take it down, makes it clear that what drove him crazy was the stunning brutality of the terrorists (Hamas in the lead), not only to Israelis, but to their own people, and the inexplicable fondness of the global progressive left for this kind of revolting and brutal movement. And a single reading of the comments *from which his accusers drew their evidence for genocidal intent* – "*they should be put down*" – would have revealed that when asked on the spot to say what he meant by the image of the pit bull, he meant not the Palestinian people, but "the terrorists."

All of this would have taken less than an hour of research, or even, a frank conversation with Andrew, all of whose responses would be corroborated by virtually every sentence he has ever written, on the Middle East, and on anything else: Anyone who knows Andrew knows he makes the basic distinction between a people into which one is born, and a political ideology, which one chooses. Defined by where you're born does not carry the responsibility that a political movement does, especially one with an explicit ideology. It is perfectly legitimate to judge such a movement, and where called for, judge it harshly. And, far from being "dehumanizing," the comparison of a political movement to an animal has a long and in some cases, courageous role in the history of political freedom in the West.

So the natural thing, in a mature community, would have been for more mature members of the community, to calm down the hotheads, and demand responses from those who so deliberately misrepresented Pessin in insisting, against all evidence they possessed and manipulated, that Pessin was a genocidal hater. A vigorous exchange in the school paper – or even a moderated website put up for the community's perusal – would have rapidly led to the accusing party's loss, and a win for a just, reasoning, empirically based scholarly community. The school paper would have passed on to hands more capable of professionalism and basic fairness; and the accusing students discredited for their attempted slander.

Granted, that's not as interesting as what happened, and many here I know think great good came out of the dramatic events on campus. But not every dramatic development is good news.

But that boring – or for some of us, stirring victory for the civic polity – didn't happen. Instead, led by aggressive members of the faculty and student body, the outcry against *Pessin* for this reading created an atmosphere of such hostility that he had to run for cover... and I mean that seriously. Even as those leading this charge were energized by a sense of unity and purpose, that feeling was purchased at incalculable cost to Andrew Pessin. Any of us here today cannot imagine how terrifying his experience must have been, and wonder honestly whether we could withstand such psychological assaults and betrayals, even by friends.

So consider me Andrew's alter ego, come to rebuke you for your shamefully cruel treatment of him. Not knowing the details, I can afford to be much more understanding. Unlike him, I do not have furious conversations in my head about

those of you he thought were a) his friends, and b) people with intellectual and moral integrity. So maybe I can soften the blows as I deliver you my version of what I imagine to be his rebuke.

Let's start with the simplest level of moral failing. There is not a faculty person on this campus who would want to be treated as you treated your colleague, Andrew Pessin. On the contrary, many of you go to great lengths to avoid even being associated with Pessin for fear of even a fraction of the full dose meted out to him.

And yet you participated in his exile from a campus where the dominant narrative saw him as a moral monster who made students cry. But even were that true, *even had Andy called for the genocide of the Palestinian people, and therefore deserved your harsh judgment*, he deserved a fair hearing to find out how accurate the image. If guilty, then your opprobrium would be richly deserved. But, lest the decision issue from a kangaroo court, he at least deserved to be heard. You owed it to your own integrity to have heard both sides before judging him.

So he, and civil polities that substitute a discourse of fairness for violence in dispute settlement, deserved more. He and we deserved at the very least that when students with a harsh agenda came to your offices with complaints about him, you find out more before you judge and act against him. He did not deserve that, in response to the tears of students, you throw your colleague under the bus without even hearing his defense, without yourselves thinking this through? And yet, in all this moral drama, *not one of those who signed the petitions or statements called him to ask him what his side was*, before you joined forces denouncing his hate speech.

In other words, Connecticut College participated in just the kind of ritual that the great sociologist Rene Girard called "the scapegoat sacrifice." as the origin of all [primitive religious solidarity](#). Kill an arbitrary, surrogate victim, a scapegoat, and create solidarity among the guilty survivor-participants in that blood sacrifice. Today, Connecticut College is just such a community (although, being a post-modern sacrifice, there was no blood), and the solidarity and collective purpose forged by that crime of scapegoating seeks to preserve itself at the price of not hearing from someone like me, someone who disagrees with you, someone who comes to you with words of rebuke.

This is the exact opposite of what academic openness means, the opposite of "inclusive excellence" since it excludes criticism. This is part of a collective identity forged in unity, in compliance. It operates through the fear it instills in its sacrifice of the scapegoat. No one wants to share his fate. Last semester, the only faculty merely to insist on due process for Pessin, were on the verge of retirement; only one untenured professor had the integrity to dissent. I have seen a number of emails from faculty and students alike expressing fear of dissenting from the deeply emotional consensus. So one of the sociological/anthropological phenomena with which the Connecticut College community has fresh and intimate experience, is just how intimidation works, just how modern scape-goating collective violence forces people to step in line. In terms of a precious archive of self-reflection on a moment of moral failure, what happened last semester offers a harvest of insights.

Let us take the counter-factual course of what might have happened at Connecticut College, had you behaved with more of the kind of gravitas that has created a free academia. If *l'esprit de l'escalier* is when you realize, as you return home and climb the stairs, what you *should have said* earlier that evening, then let's do a moral one about last semester. If, after having determined that Pessin meant Hamas, not the Palestinian people, at least some curious members of the community would have taken the investigation to the next obvious question: Was he right to compare Hamas to a rabid pit bull?

Indeed, the most disturbing irony of this entire episode, comes from the fact that, not only was the FB posting not the awful, racist, dehumanizing hate-speech it was made out to be, but it was precisely opposed to people who, to take the language used by Pessin's accusers, "call for the systematic abuse, killing, and hate of another people." The irony of course, is that just as Pessin does not call for this, the organization he was comparing to a rabid pit bull *does*.

Look at what Hamas says, from its charter to its current crop of preachers, and you find a terrifyingly racist world, where the Quran is used to give divine authority to the belief that Jews are descendants of apes and pigs (unlike Muslims), a world that believes that the time has come for the fulfillment of the apocalyptic hadith about an Endtime battle with evil, in which the Muslims rise up and kill every last Jew, and even the rocks and the trees call out, "Oh Muslim, oh Servant of Allah, there is a Jew hiding behind me, come and kill him." Here we find a world where, constantly subjected to this kind of brainwashing, $\frac{3}{4}$ of Palestinians polled, hold by this genocidal hadith, a world in which Western children's shows like Sesame street are appropriated to produce a generation of children who learn to hate Jews, and consider blowing themselves up to kill as many Jewish people as possible, the highest aspiration. Anyone genuinely opposed to racism and violent hatreds could not spend a fraction of their day perusing the kinds of things Hamas preaches in mosques, broadcasts on the air, teaches to its children in schools, without being overwhelmed with disgust at the hatred, the genocidal rage that pervades their discourse.

And yet, when one reads the texts of Pessin's accusers, one realizes that they are not, like Pessin, opposed to the racism they denounce. On the contrary, they seek to protect Hamas from the very accusations they hurled at Pessin. Indeed, the Online Petition argued, it mattered not whether Pessin meant the Palestinians or Hamas: in both cases, the criticism dehumanized them, preparing for their genocide:

It is clear that regardless of whom the professor is addressing here, he is indisputably dehumanizing them. Dehumanization is a tool of racism.

Dehumanization has been used all throughout human history to justify genocide, colonialism and hatred of many communities.

Had anyone been awake at the moral switch at Connecticut College, when this appeared, they would have known that Hamas indeed dehumanizes, to justify "genocide, colonialism, and hatred of many communities." But instead they railed against Pessin for his sharp criticism of so deplorable a movement.

Academic institutions have, at any given time, dozens if not hundreds of real intellectuals, people who research diligently and self-critically, who even though we know we can't be "objective", do know it's our responsibility to be as accurate as possible. In some cases they're proud of their great minds, in other's embarrassed. In

the case of Andrew Pessin, the Connecticut College community has excluded one of its most vibrant and creative minds, a man with a remarkably mature moral understanding of the temptation of getting revenge. And in exchange, they've gotten a reign of intellectual intimidation, and the guilty unity of the scapegoat sacrifice.

When my talk was first announced, some people objected that I had nothing of value to say about "freedom of speech" or "academic freedom." But I actually do. A lot.

First: scapegoating sacrifices as described by Girard, and acted out by Connecticut College last Spring are designed to silence free speech. Their purpose is to intimidate anyone who wants to dissent into silence. This is what blasphemy codes are about. This is the core of the world of violent imposition of conformity that democracies, and within them, academia, decisively renounce.

Second: historically, the violent imposition of conformity often revolved around issues of honor – who had it, who commanded it, who lost it and how he regained it. Lancelot could, in such a world, insist on his innocence in the case of adultery with Guinevere because he had killed everyone who dared accuse him. The rise of the modern civic polity, in which people get to speak freely, derives in no small part from our ability to master the instinct to beat someone up when they say unpleasant things. That means developing a strong enough ego that we can hear criticism, *public* criticism, without going violent. As the saying goes, "polite, means not saying certain things lest there be violence; civil means saying what one needs to say, and there won't be violence." To reach the civil state, we need to build up our egos, to overcome the demand of honor-shame dynamics where it is *accepted, expected, even necessary, to shed blood for the sake of honor*. This is, I would submit, the core of the progressive credo: empathy, dignity, mutual understanding, positive-sum interactions with the "other." And none of it possible without the ability to self-criticize. (For more on this, see Bradley Campbell and Jason Manning, "[Micro-aggression and Moral Cultures](#)," *Comparative Sociology*, 13 (2014), 692-726.)

Third: through indulging our children (and ourselves), we have let honor-shame dynamics in the back door. Micro-aggressions, trigger warnings, unsafe spaces, all considered enemies of "inclusive excellence," constitute on the one hand a ridiculous indulgence of the right not to have one's feelings hurt, and a gaping hole through which people who would readily resort to more extreme measures if they could, drive the truck of their hyper-sensitive demands that their critics shut up. To quote the petition's demand of the faculty:

We demand that the entire senior administration of College engage publicly in free speech on behalf of its angered and disquieted community, expressly declaring that it condemns the racist sentiments of the professor and **asking that the backlash against students who have publicly identified the professor's racism for what it was, cease with immediate effect.**

In other words, we want the College to exercise its free speech to side with the angered and disquieted community that accuses Pessin of hatred and racism, and shut up anyone who disagrees with their (we now know, false and tendentious) readings of Pessin's post. I don't blame the students who wrote this drivel; I blame the grown ups who should have called them on it. I blame the community that did not call for the

petition to be removed, not only because it defamed a member of their faculty, not only because it was intellectually manipulative and dishonest, but because it was an embarrassment to the community of scholars responsible for educating these students.

I don't know about you, but when I read 1984 in High School, I thought Newspeak worked because of the impositions of Big Brother. Now we know, that at least for a certain amount of time, it can draw supposedly free, critical, minds into its thrall.

And that is the core of my message to you today: the "certain amount of time" during which Newspeak can dominate the thinking of free people. In my religious tradition, we believe that God does not want to punish the wicked, He much prefers their repentance. What He wants is not to punish someone who sells his brother into slavery and lies to his father about him being dead, and then kills the woman he wronged in order to save his family honor. What he wants is someone who, the second time around, tells the truth no matter what the humiliation he must endure to maintain his integrity... someone who prefers public shame and private integrity to public honor and private guilt.

This is now the time for other voices to speak out about what happened last semester... for faculty to do a *mea culpa* in front of their classes, and pursue a research project on how what happened could have happened. Your own honor code, *repeatedly violated last semester*, demands you undertake a serious, honest, self-critical investigation.

My suggestion: Establish a website in which all the key documents from last semester – the FB posting with comments, the accusatory letters, the online petition – receive scrutiny, in which they receive an extensive commentary by people seized with *l'esprit de l'escalier*, people who want to understand what happened, and how to stop it from happening again. In the archives of the endless struggle for a decent and dignified society, one that renounces the guilty pleasures of the sacred violence embodied in scapegoat sacrifice, for the sake of genuinely inclusive excellence, this would offer one of the most remarkable and educational dossiers.

So, to quote the Christian notion of *felix culpa*, the fortunate sin of last semester – the moral failure, the missing of the mark, the lack of courage – actually offers the faculty and students and administrators at Connecticut College, an enviable position. Honest self-criticism from them could produce extraordinary learning curves in the life of their institution of "higher learning," and more broadly in the annals of freedom of speech. If any place could profit from a performance of *The Crucible* right now, it's Salem on the Thames. If any student newspaper or student government organization could profit by hosting a searching (and possibly searing) discussion of what it means to run a responsible elected body or newspaper, it's Connecticut College's SGA and the *College Voice*. Imagine the maturity of those who would have gone through that process. Imagine the resilience of the culture with people experienced in defending an open (inclusive and excellent) society. I wish you all the best in these endeavors.