

# University for Sale: Campus Watch, Israel Studies, and the Demise of Dissent at Columbia

*Gil Anidjar*

A few months after 9/11, the son of one of the most virulent anti-Communist ideologues of the Cold War made a dramatic appearance on American television. With astonishing self-confidence, Daniel Pipes pointed a threatening finger at the camera and warned teachers and scholars of Middle East Studies in no uncertain terms: “We are watching you. Your students, in your classrooms, are watching you.” By that time, Pipes had already become a major figure in a deeply unequal contest: a massive collective effort that sought to define Islam as the new enemy of the United States and of democracy. The televised admonition’s “pedagogic” gesture was, however, specifically intended to “correct”—indeed, to direct—the manner in which Islam, Middle East politics, and the history of U.S. policies and actions in the Middle East are taught at American universities. One striking materialization of the unequivocal warning was an elaborate and professional looking website where college students were invited to communicate their concerns, their opinions, or simply their complaints regarding their professors and classes they were taking on Middle East–related topics. The “Campus Watch” campaign, directly targeting the classroom but part of a much larger neo-con apparatus, was just beginning.

What were the main charges against Middle East studies departments? Dominated (so the accusation went) by the work of Edward Said on Orientalism, they had renounced the pursuit of their true purpose: to advance the kind of knowl-



**Bari Weiss, left, a sophomore at Columbia University, speaks at a press conference organized by Columbians for Academic Freedom as a crowd listens outside the gates to Columbia University in New York Thursday March 31, 2005. Weiss, and Columbia University senior Ariel Beery, second from left, co-founders of Columbians for Academic Freedom, held the press conference in response to the university report stating that Columbia University's Middle Eastern studies professors did not engage in large-scale intimidation of pro-Israel students.**

edge that could strengthen American policy in the Middle East, and to ensure in a quasi-prophetic manner the prevention of terrorist attacks such as those of 9/11. Having failed on both counts, the field as a whole had to be transformed and reinvented (presumably in the same way the whole of political science, German studies, and Slavic studies should have been after 1989). It had to be purged, moreover, of its dangerous elements. Books and individuals were singled out. Minimally, they would have to be countered by more “balanced” or “serious”

*Gil Anidjar teaches in the Department of Middle East and Asian Languages and Cultures at Columbia University, New York.*

scholars and research, by which was meant more engaged support for American policy and for Israel. Congress was mobilized, as was the media. On Campus Watch's website one could find an impressive number of articles and texts collected in various student-run or other newspapers and journals (often of exceedingly poor quality), or written on interminable blogs by experts with apparently limitless time and resources. In addition, a number of "files" were gathered, targeting specific professors, most of whom were Palestinian, Iranian, Lebanese, and so forth. More recently, the finger-pointing ideologue Pipes (who has the ear of the White House and of a large public audience thanks to substantial media coverage) was calling for a revision of the history of the American concentration camps built during World War II against Japanese Americans. According to this argument, not only were these camps necessary (and merely "Spartan" rather than brutal), they were also important and legitimate means in the pursuit of "homeland security." Implicit was the justification of comparable steps taken toward the containment of that other threat, the Muslim "fifth column" in our midst. Hunting season was now open against professors or any individual who supported the Palestinian cause or publicly opposed American policy in the "war on terror."

Parallel to this massive effort and apparently without direct link to it, Jewish studies (a well-established if still nebulous concept institutionalized into departments, programs, or institutes, depending on the university) were undergoing a singular development. While the 1960s and 1970s had seen a significant increase in Jewish studies programs, and the 1980s and 1990s an explosion in chairs and programs in Holocaust studies, in the last decade or so there began to emerge a new field called "Israel studies." Ahead of this peculiar trend, Columbia University—currently embroiled in controversy over alleged anti-Semitism in its Middle East studies department, and a privileged target of Campus Watch—had distinguished itself in a number of ways. Columbia established the first chair of Jewish history in any American university in 1930 (closely following on Harvard's 1925 decision to have a chair in "Hebrew literature and philosophy"). In 1980 Columbia took the lead by establishing the Center for Israel and Jewish Studies. Today, the Center has a faculty roster of about fifteen professors or lecturers (many of whom are world renowned) and it boasts six endowed chairs

disseminated through the departments of history, religion, German literature, and Middle East and Asian Languages and Cultures (Barnard College houses an additional Jewish studies chair). Young scholars and senior visiting and adjunct professors and lecturers, often from Israel, teach in these departments, as well as in the School of International and Public Affairs. All are able to maintain close contacts with the prestigious faculty of Columbia's neighbor, the Jewish Theological Seminary, and of New York University (with its own Department of Hebrew and Judaic Studies and its newly created "Center for Israel Studies"), with which Columbia has formal agreements that enable students to benefit from the

arrangement as well. According to the current president of Columbia University, however, Jewish and Israel studies suffer from a lack of comprehensiveness and balance. (By way of comparison, note that Columbia does not have a full-time position in African literatures.) There is therefore reason to be confident that the Center for Israel and Jewish Studies is about to grow—an unusual development in the humanities, where programs are more often shrinking, but one likely to happen at other universities as well.

Is there reason to see a link between neocon activities like Campus Watch, the growth of Jewish studies and the emergence of Israel studies as a discipline? When the very same ideologues who advocate the overhaul of Middle East studies are regularly issuing calls for strengthening the professorate with pro-American and pro-Israel scholars, such a link is difficult to dismiss. Moreover, the overt strategy

of Campus Watch was precisely to locate the battlefield in the classroom (and the current accusations do target directly the teaching of Israeli history and politics, and the alleged behavior of professors toward their students on that very issue). Finally, and in the larger frame, Israel continues to be presented as the vulnerable and courageous first line of defense in a global attack said to be directed at the United States, Europe, and—the association is repeatedly made—the Jews. The "Green Peril" is thus the latest in a lineup of historical figures serving to justify repetitive and ever-renewed concerns and fears regarding homeland security and the future of civilization, as well as anti-Semitism—this last issue all but erasing the distinction between Judaism and Zionism, and between Israel and the Jews. (But do recall the name of Columbia's Center for Israel and Jewish Studies, and ask:

*The "Green Peril" is thus  
the latest in a lineup of  
historical figures serving to  
justify repetitive and ever-  
renewed concerns and fears  
regarding homeland  
security and the future of  
civilization, as well as anti-  
Semitism—this last issue all  
but erasing the distinction  
between Judaism and  
Zionism, and between  
Israel and the Jews.*

Who is it that fails to maintain the distinction?) Officials and pundits handle the charge of anti-Semitism with great skill, if little acumen, and the competition is fierce as to who will voice their concern loudest over the “enabling climate” allegedly produced by naïve or misinformed left-leaning liberals, “deconstructionists,” and all those said to dominate American campuses and—why not?—American society.

Are we witnessing a new McCarthyism? Is this a concerted and frontal attack on free speech? Is this a battle of ideas? Absolutely, for it is those in the seat of power or close to it, and whose opinions are currently leading the country and its policies, who are on the offensive, while claiming vulnerability and harassment. Yet, I would suggest that invoking ideas and free speech is not the way to deal with the specific issues at hand, which, ultimately, are U.S. policy and Israel’s existence.

I do not mean to diminish the significance of these issues, but I do want to suggest that very little of what I have described so far reflects a genuine concern with intellectual or critical positions. The role of Campus Watch and of those seeking to expand the peculiar field called “Israel studies” has, after all, little to do with identity politics or with recently emerging or narrow interest groups seeking to gain some equal access, some control over all-too-often biased or even racist representations. At stake, rather, is dominance and a much larger pattern of inequality, a matter of power and management that forces us to call into question the role and value of dissent in what is still called democracy. And here the choice of Columbia University neither to resolve nor to dismiss the Campus Watch-style campaign (as ex-Provost Jonathan Cole had swiftly and courageously done in the past), but rather to give it credit, to legitimate and even foster it, makes more than perfect sense.

Sad but true: There is no longer a need to suppress information or alternative knowledges, for it is our relationship to dissent and to knowledge that has fundamentally changed. Inequality rules, but information *is* available. (Who doesn’t know that Bush and others have repeatedly lied? But who still thinks it matters? Who needs the media to tell them that we, they, that is, 95 percent of the U.S. population, of the world’s and, most certainly, of Palestine’s, are poorer and poorer? That the war on drugs and the war on terrorism are only a part of an all-out war on poverty? Who manages to care?) In the United States at least, this is hardly a matter of information or of education, both of which are equally dismal in quality but largely available nonetheless. In spite of the scandalous cuts on education, a general knowledge can certainly be accessed or bought everywhere in this country and even elsewhere. But is it not rather striking that it is of little use? And that dissent has long been *neutralized*? That is why today, in this country, one no longer needs censorship, much less a Ministry of Information. Part of that frightening but massive trend is no doubt that free and courageous speech is no longer current on university campuses. It does not take much insight to notice that knowledge is hardly

power—rather, power is and determines (what qualifies as) knowledge—and that the academy is no nest of rebellious revolutionaries about to embark on some anarchic and value-defying rampage. Or that “tenured radicals” and intellectuals have less than a significant effect on public opinion. By now, it is not even clear that professors have any effect, much less an *intimidating* one, on their students, those young and fervent consumers of professional guarantees and corporate futures or champions of the information superhighways and of human rights programs. It has long been the case that courage and integrity have few forums or outlets aside from the Internet, that endless sea of commercial white noise where each is entitled to an opinion more narrowly defined and targeted, if even less effective, than advertisement spots on a specialized cable channel. In this open space empty of amity lines, the confines of good conduct mandate that one must allow for “pros” and “cons” in a balanced manner, and innumerable “rights” must be respected at the risk of producing more self-righteous “victims.”

Respect is no doubt due to the valiant efforts at nuanced explanations and active interventions of those who believe in dissent and who have in fact become the very real targets of death threats or at least of explicit and efficient intimidation campaigns strangely aimed at silencing them, or worse, inventing red herrings in order to determine the agenda (“anti-Semitism”). Indeed, the question no longer seems to be what one is protecting or defending, or whether fear is even remotely justified. One would like to think that truth, justice, or simply the freedom of expression or ideas, will be defended. That they are what is at stake. But the questions raised by the combined effects of the developments we have been considering seem rather to be the following: What is it that is being sold? What new product, what new thought, what new university, what new chairs and programs—what new *inequalities*—are here being hyped up, advertised and peddled? What new forms of governance and dominance? And to whom is this capital campaign really addressed? What donors are being successfully wooed? What corporations expanded or created? (Until recently Columbia University proudly equipped its I.D. cards with the logo and magnetic strip of none other than Citibank.) It may be that a dangerous game is being played, for controversies and discontent, even fear tactics, can famously swerve, and quite unpredictably so. But universities, like all great corporations and the governments who serve and represent them, know how to take calculated risks. They know how to play the already uneven field (and the growing fear) and thus to manage dissent so that it becomes a positive moment in the popularity and fundraising contest they have set for themselves. Dissent, like customer surveys, works to the benefit of those who already determine the agenda. For in politics as in marketing two rules continue to apply against all better judgment: business is not war (or, finance and economics are not politics), and there is no such thing as bad press. □