

Interview with Dwayne Booth, Penn lecturer attacked over anti-genocide cartoons

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Landon Gourov
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On February 4, University of Pennsylvania’s interim president, Larry Jameson, denounced as “antisemitic” lecturer Dwayne Booth’s cartoons protesting Israel’s genocide against Palestinians. Booth recently spoke with Landon Gourov of the World Socialist Web Site about the attack on freedom of expression on campuses and the meaning of his artwork. A noted political cartoonist who publishes under the name “Mr. Fish,” Booth teaches at Penn’s Annenberg School of Communications.

Landon Gourov: Why did University of Pennsylvania president Larry Jameson feel the need to condemn your cartoons?

Dwayne Booth: It stems from an article the *Washington Free Beacon* published. It’s a website that is notorious for calling everyone an antisemite, including Bernie Sanders and Obama. They were responding to the cartoons I’ve been doing condemning Israeli atrocities in Gaza. These were cartoons and illustrations that accompanied articles written by Chris Hedges over the last several months, starting October 7.

I’ve criticized Israel for decades. The *Washington Free Beacon* saw this as an opportunity to continue their assault. There’s been a lot of attacks from right-wing news organizations, on college campuses and at universities with the imperative of weeding out “antisemitism” in these supposedly left-wing, Marxist bastions.

There’s been blood in the water at Penn because of the ousting of former president Liz Magill, as well as the controversy surrounding Roger Waters’ invitation to participate in a literature conference called Palestine Writes on campus. They call Waters an antisemite for dressing up in a leather jacket and doing something he’s been doing since 1979. This is from *The Wall*. It’s theater. It’s so beyond disingenuous and inaccurate that it barely warrants commenting on. Except now it does because there are ramifications.

LG: There have been a number of these “antisemitism” investigations opened up by the Biden administration. They’re using, I believe, Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, which prohibits discrimination on the basis of religion, to investigate what they claim to be antisemitic attacks. Penn’s president is now using similar methods, or a similar usage of the word, against you and your art.

DB: Do you know what the Espionage Act is? It was put together in 1917 to make it essentially illegal, or treasonous, to produce commentary that discouraged enlistment in the United States’ efforts in World War I. There were cartoonists who were attacked under it. A magazine called *The Masses* in New York was shut down by the government because of the work that the cartoonists were doing. History now shows that the First World War was unjustified. But the Espionage Act was rendered in such a broad way that it has been used since then to attack people who have dissenting voices, including most recently, all the whistleblowers that we

appreciate. Julian Assange, for example. Soon we’re going to find out if he’s going to be extradited back to the United States.

LG: Using the word “antisemite” today against people is similar to the McCarthyite debacle in which accusations were made against major figures as communists. The accusation of antisemitism is a serious charge against somebody, which can ruin a person’s reputation and career. Just as in the 1950s, when an accusation of being a communist would ruin the careers of the artists and directors who were accused.

Since this statement by President Jameson came out, and the media focus on your work, what has the response been from your coworkers and your students?

DB: My students love it because, before the thing exploded the way it has, this is the stuff we talked about in class. My students see this as an amazing opportunity to see real life mirroring what we talked about in class. It’s happening in real time. I haven’t lost any students.

Obviously, the media is being driven by people who are calling me antisemitic. They have a definite agenda. The initial part of this episode was being led by people advancing that narrative, having no idea of who I am, what work I do. A lot of the reporting said that the images in question were all done on my personal website, which is inaccurate. These are things that were published and vetted by actual news websites, like the ScheerPost. Robert Scheer is Jewish, and lost more than half of his family to the Holocaust. He would recognize what antisemitism is. Many of my readers are also of Jewish descent.

And so when my cartoons went up—as I said at the beginning, they were up for months drawing lots of comments at ScheerPost, and also on the Chris Hedges Report, which is where my work also appears—there was not a single mention of antisemitism. The cartoons were all about the debate over what is going on in Gaza at the hands of Israel. It’s important to recognize that this stuff lived for quite a while until it became some red meat for people who wanted to dog-whistle to the laziest thinkers in the society.

I’ve been teaching for ten years at Annenberg, and I also taught at Barnard College, with students from both Barnard and Columbia. I’ve had around 1,000 students pass through my courses and come in close contact with me. There’s not been a single complaint about what I do. It’s a pretty popular class and we have a really rigorous time debating all this stuff in the history of free speech and provocative satire. It’s a grown-up conversation in the classroom. But when it’s moved into the realm of people seeing a political opportunity, it becomes something even outside myself. I don’t really even take this as a personal attack because it’s not. A, it’s nonsense, and B, I see other people who are falling victim to similar attacks.

As to your point about the “Red Scare,” it’s similar. Time wins out, and you look at that situation now and you say to yourself, “Wow, that was extremely unfair. People’s lives were ruined for absolutely no reason at all.” It’s just a shame that people have to wait for the dust to clear before they ask, “How did I allow that to happen? How did I participate in it?”

LG: You brought up Liz Magill and how she was forced to resign. I recently went down with another WSWS correspondent to the University of Pennsylvania campus. There were students who had no clue about what was going on. Many of the faculty I spoke to were very hesitant to speak about the issues involved. Would you say that since McGill was forced to resign there’s been an atmosphere of intimidation on campus?

DB: If you look at the interim president’s statement, again, he doesn’t know me. He certainly doesn’t know satire, proven by the fact that he said, “This is not a time for satire, to talk about what’s going on in Gaza with Israel.” Satire functions best when it’s doing that. Otherwise, it’s parody and burlesque, and it doesn’t draw blood and start the kinds of conversations that need to be started. That said, I don’t take it personally. To my mind, Jameson’s a politician, so he has to equivocate one way, pander another way.

I can’t speak for other faculty, but the faculty that I do know and associate with at Annenberg think it’s supposed to be a place to test theories, to speak openly about things, to engage bluntly with what one might consider nefarious ideas, politically or culturally. They think you should be able to engage in these kinds of conversations without being chastised as something you’re not. People will tend not to say anything and to try to keep their heads down because there are bullets zipping.

Now, to your question: Is there intimidation? Yes, it feels really unsafe. I’ve talked to people at the ACLU who have brought up the “red menace” time and McCarthyism, and they have said it’s never been as bad as it is right now in the United States when it comes to these kinds of issues. What can be done about it is to push back, which is what I’ve been doing, to the degree that I can do it.

This is not the first time this has happened to me. I got death threats when I was critical of the Bush administration going into Iraq. I even got death threats when I continued, after Obama became president, to criticize Obama and talk about his drone program, for instance, and secret renditions and all the disgusting stuff that he continued to perpetuate. The difference was, I wasn’t attached to an institution as I am now. So being attached to Annenberg—a community that has a history of protecting people with unique attempts to advance conversations in many different areas—for me to be linked to that institution, the only pain I have now is that there are people in that institution who are being attacked and being accused of harboring a dangerous person such as myself. I have empathy for those people, and I do appreciate their support, and they are supporting me.

The other side of that is I’ve been in this fight my entire life, and I actually appreciate it, and I really want to have that fight. I should also let you know that I’ve now been answering every single email since this came up. I have had some death threats. But I haven’t gotten a lot of hateful emails. I’ve been mostly getting letters of support. Ralph Nader wrote to me last night, in fact.

LG: One image that has been singled out by the media is your drawing called “The Anti-Semite,” which shows three men in business suits drinking glasses of blood labeled “Gaza,” standing in front of a combined US and Israeli flag, and looking at a white dove while saying to each other, “Who invited that lousy antisemite?” What was the inspiration for that image?

DB: The answer might not prove to be that interesting. I love the *New Yorker* cartoons that have to do, for example, with a cocktail party and elite people talking about things. It’s farce in a way that I appreciate. So when I was thinking about this whole situation of power players, what is their take? How are they benefiting from the assault going on in Gaza? Of

course you break that down into the most basic players. You’ve got the United States sending money and weaponry to Israel to perpetrate these crimes. So they are the two beneficiaries. So let me put them at a party. Let’s make it just about those two. I put both flags behind them, as a hybrid flag. They’re attached to each other.

The commentary refers to the fact that anybody who calls for a ceasefire or demands peace rather than a continuation of mass violence is being shouted down. The cartoon is about me in that way too. Anybody who attempts to block this ethnic cleansing, genocide, whatever term you want to use for it, is being called an antisemite. What is the most basic form of that? A peace dove. So the peace dove is coming into their space where they are so careless and satiating their lust for continued power by drinking the blood of the most innocent people in the conflict, who are the Gazans. That’s their elixir feeding their momentum forward.

Blood has long been used not only in visual commentary, but in writing. If you want to show somebody who is being careless about the pain and suffering they are causing, you have them drinking the blood of the people they don’t give a shit about. So the whole attachment to the “blood libel” trope never even crossed my mind. You can’t use that to say I’m an antisemite and I want to advance this trope. That one in particular, when I published that one on ScheerPost and also on Instagram, no mention of antisemitism.

Some people who are triggered seem to think that because the Star of David is utilized in an image criticizing Israel it is proof that it’s antisemitic, given the history of using that symbol, particularly in 1930s and 1940s Germany. To which I say, listen, I get it, but you have to look a little deeper, and you also have to look at the strategy of the Israeli government. Someone who wants to level criticism against the state of Israel, someone who uses imagery, is going to have the Star of David appear, in a kind of shorthand, because it is on the Israeli flag. I’m going to challenge you right back and say, prove to me that any of this commentary is not about, exclusively, the state of Israel. There’s no commentary about Judaism. There’s no commentary about Jews.

And again, we can also talk about that in regard to any of the other images, the one where I utilize Holocaust survivors holding up placards of support for the people suffering in Gaza, which was an illustration that accompanied an article by Hedges. You can say that my using those visual metaphors is too strong, that they don’t resonate with you as a reader. That means you’re not the intended audience, because there are plenty of people who absolutely loved this work that I’m doing because they do appreciate how fearlessly extreme I try to go with my commentary.

LG: You once said that you believe many people don’t understand how to interpret political cartoons these days. Would you say that the people making these accusations of “blood libel” are coming from a place of ignorance as well as trying to push an agenda?

DB: I think it’s a mix. It’s important to make a clarification because you’ve said a few times, “the media is doing this” and “the media is doing that.” Remember, this all stemmed from a very specific kind of media that, again, is an extremely right wing source.

Let me just tack on to what you said about illiteracy when it comes to knowing how to read imagery inside of commentary. People are trained to interact with imagery based on advertising much more than anything else. Now social media has plugged into the methodology of advertising, meaning it’s imagery that’s there to garner an immediate reaction. People used to actually know to take a little bit more time with it and to try to contemplate, “What does this really mean?”

For instance, in the ‘80s, if you saw the famous David Levine illustration of Henry Kissinger, “Screwing the World,” you wouldn’t automatically say, “Oh, my gosh, I don’t know what is going on here, but this is a scene of rape and nobody should see this.” When, in fact, what it’s trying to communicate is that Kissinger’s legacy is as brutal and as disgusting as that. It’s a metaphor for something that is deeper and darker

and deserving of our attention.

People aren't used to doing that at all, which is why I said earlier that I'm doing all that I can to respond to these things in a way that allows and forces a different kind of conversation, as is, I would say, the piece you wrote in the WSWS, which I'm very appreciative of. To try to turn down the emotional heat by naming what we could say are the truthful components inside the story.

These are all very serious things to be talking about. Let's not deviate too far from what this commentary is addressing, a genocide happening in real time right in front of us, and it's something that we do not have the luxury of time to ponder about afterward. I know people who know people who are over there. I have family members who have relatives over there. This is all so dark. If it actually can be addressed in a way that will minimize the loss of life, I will not back off from that.

LG: These accusations against you are really ridiculous considering the events going on in Gaza. There are millions of people that are displaced. They don't have access to clean water or food or electricity.

DB: Unless we address this situation as a humanitarian crisis, I don't think there's any hope. Some people are so eager to fall in line behind the principles of the team they like to be part of that it destroys critical thinking and disallows them the opportunity to see the agony really going on over there.

You have people who are eating grass, people dying from starvation, at this point in massive numbers in Gaza. Pay attention to that. Look at the number of women and children killed. Civilians are dying, innocent civilians by the tens of thousands. That's what should be leading the conversation. Not that I'm an antisemite for saying, "This is how I picture in my mind the villainy. And this is what I'm ridiculing in pursuit of peace and the cessation of hell on earth, literally."

LG: Before Magill was forced out in November, there was a student group called Chavurah at Penn that tried to show an anti-Zionist film called *Israelism*. The film met with a very good reception from both Jewish and Muslim students here. But the group and its leader were threatened with disciplinary action for showing the film. Then Magill was accused of antisemitism for not doing enough to try to silence opposition. Now you are being targeted by the president who replaced Magill. Here at Penn you see this connection between the US supporting this war abroad, and its need to quash opposition at home.

DB: The people at the top at Penn are being driven, I would say, by money issues. They are terrified of what the trustees think. It's easier to avoid conversations than to have them, particularly when it comes to difficult issues. So the attitude is, "Why do you have to stir the pot here on campus? Can we not have such a public display of concern and a deep level of debate about serious issues? Because you know what? Just like in all advertising, we have customers that we don't want to incite. So let's only have public debates that appeal to the dimmest wits and with the people who are the least likely to cause trouble."

LG: In his statement against you, the interim president said that there were "things that shouldn't be said," or that some stones should be left unturned, something along those lines. What does that even mean? Do you believe that this is an attack not just on your right to protest, but on the rights of all students and faculty?

DB: Absolutely. That's why I say it's not about me. In fact, the article that you guys did pointed that out. You made it, properly, a much broader discussion. Because what's interesting to me with this whole process is the people who seem the least safe as students and faculty belong to the most moneyed universities in the country. It's the Ivy League. These are campuses where free speech is in most danger.

When all of this started, when students started to get together and try to communicate, congregate around their sorrow and fear about a continuation of violence in Gaza, these right-wing groups hired trucks that go around the Ivy League campuses to intimidate them. I've seen it at the

University of Pennsylvania. The one here had Roger Waters on it, saying how can Liz Magill support an antisemite? And the one that was going around Columbia had students' pictures on the side, students who had been seen at demonstrations where they were talking about the need for a ceasefire. And the side of the truck would have the picture of the student and it would say, "Columbia's new number one antisemite." So it started to make students terrified to go to these events to support peace.

Now, if you wrote that down and tried to sell it to somebody, they would say, "What dystopian society are we talking about here?" It's affecting people's lives in a way that is excruciatingly unfair.

LG: Do you believe the use of this antisemitism slur is meant to confuse popular consciousness? What do you think is the way forward?

DB: The accusation of antisemitism against those who are critical of the state of Israel has always been pronounced here in the United States in particular. I'll speak to that from direct experience: earlier in my career when I tried to publish a cartoon critical of Israel. I worked for the *Los Angeles Times* and a number of newspapers of record. They wouldn't publish it because they didn't want to be accused of antisemitism.

Starting about five years ago, I began to notice in my classroom that the younger generation are braver about broaching this subject. We could talk about problems in regard to Israel like you would talk about any other state. It's been gaining momentum in the sense that people do feel freer talking about that issue and defying that lazy conflation of opposition to Israel with antisemitism. This is amplifying the attacks from the people who have the most to gain by silencing public discourse. They see that the tide is turning and they're scared and they're angry about it.

As for me, I've had to go on Zoom for a class because there were potential dangers to my students. We have to get to the space where we can have meaningful and honest exchanges with each other. I don't expect the interim president or the UPenn administration is going to want to have a conversation with me, which is a shame, but that's the way forward. The way forward is through discourse.

LG: Thank you.



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