

Nan Levinson interviews controversial academic Steve Salaita whose case brought the right to academic freedom to the headlines. Salaita talks about the challenges to free speech that continue at US universities.

Steven Salaita, a professor of Indigenous Studies, opened his email at the beginning of August 2014 to find that the academic appointment at the University of Illinois at Champaign-Urbana (UIUC) that he was about to assume had been revoked. When the administration explained that the his firing came in response to his activity on Twitter, where he was vividly criticizing Israel's military action in Gaza, his case ballooned into a cause celebre among American academics, who saw it as a direct challenge to academic freedom and another step toward constricting and sanitizing university life. The following months were, Salaita said recently, "a whirlwind." Only now is he able to reflect on the larger issues.

In public statements, the university maintained that it took issue with the tone, not the content, of the tweets, that the problem was Salaita's lack of civility, but he thought otherwise. Charging breach of contract and violation of his free speech rights, he sued the university the following January. (*Index* reported on the case in "Stifling freedom," by Mark Frary, June 2015; vol. 44, 2: pp. 20-25; further details are available at <http://www.aaup.org/report/UIUC>.)

Salaita, jobless for that turbulent year, currently holds the Edward W. Said Chair of American Studies at the American University of Beirut (AUB). Speaking with *Index* by phone while in the US last December, he is still bemused by the tumult. "Now, being back at work, I go to department meetings, I go to lunch with my colleagues, I teach

class, grade papers, I think, man, they were worried that I'm dangerous? I'm absolutely harmless".

Yet Salaita's refusal to go quietly had significant consequences: scholars boycotted the university in protest; the American Association of University Professors, an influential academic organization, voted to censure UIUC; and in August, hours after a court found that Salaita's lawsuit had legal standing, the chancellor, the university's top administrator, resigned.

Finally, last November, the legal case was settled with a sizeable monetary award for Salaita. Although he relinquished any claim to his promised position, he declared victory, saying in a prepared statement, "This settlement is a vindication for me, but more importantly, it is a victory for academic freedom and the First Amendment".

[<https://ccrjustice.org/home/press-center/press-releases/settlement-reached-case-professor-fired-uncivil-tweets>]

While the final resolution may come in June, when the AAUP revisits its censure decision, this argument, like many over what can and cannot be said, was a stand-in for a deeper tension, namely the relationship of teachers' extramural speech to their teaching.

Salaita, an American of Jordanian and Palestinian heritage and an organizer of the Academic and Cultural Boycott of Israel (BDS), is now teaching courses in American Studies and Indigenous Theory. AUB follows the US academic model, so he finds the teaching and attitude toward academic freedom similar. "Once inside the classroom the same set of dynamics prevail", he said.

In his classroom, the dynamics allow for political discussions, but he explicitly encourages his students to work out and defend their own ideas, rather than ascribe to a particular point of view. Still he likes to mix it up. “One thing I bring into the classroom is a desire to have interesting debate. I think students can handle rigorous discussion. In fact, I think they enjoy it and find it very useful. So in my classes, we tend to have something of a freewheeling set of discussions”, he said with a wry laugh. “But we always come in friendly terms and leave on friendly terms”.

In response to Salaita’s firing, then-UIUC Chancellor Phyllis Wise sent a mass mailing to the campus community, titled, “Principles on Which We Stand”. [<https://illinois.edu/blog/view/1109/115906>] She wrote that while debate is important, a classroom needs to be a safe space, which Salaita would not contest. She implied that his tweets would translate into intimidation and harassment of students holding opposing opinions. That, he said, is nonsense; despite efforts to find evidence to the contrary, reviews of his teaching are stellar.

What constitutes a safe space, however, is more complex than positive student evaluations. Even if a teacher doesn’t state his or her politics explicitly, they can usually be intuited, and a classroom is not a democracy. Students, in thrall to authority or out of eagerness to please or fear of reprisal, may feel pressured to agree or keep silent. So a professor’s speech outside the classroom probably never has been wholly separated from that within. What is different now is that external speech acts are available for everyone to read and react to through social media.

As Laura Markwardt, Media and Communication Strategist of the AAUP, wrote in an email, “In recent years we have found that faculty members are more frequently

finding themselves in trouble for extramural speech disseminated on the internet, especially in social media”. This was Salaita’s fate. He continues to be a busy user of Twitter and finds it a liberating, if not trouble-free platform, given that passions of the moment are recorded there in perpetuity.

His tweets, he agreed, were as intemperate and angry as his detractors charged because they reflected how he was feeling at the time. “How are we supposed to act in the face of injustice?” he asked now. “Sometimes we *need* to articulate a sense of political anger in relation to injustice, and particularly in cases where we’re either directly or indirectly implicated”.

Still, Salaita has no difficulty distinguishing what he tweets from how he teaches. “The context of teaching and the context of commenting as a private citizen on Twitter are completely different”, he insisted. “I would never dream of speaking with students using the same tone and language and rhetoric that I would use on Twitter”.

Yet, as Salaita observed, “A speech act is never a neutral thing and how people react to a speech act is not neutral either”. This is at the heart of debates over academic freedom and over what constitutes a safe space, the current *cri de couer*, and an on-going concern of Salaita.

He believes that any worthy instructor wants to create a rewarding learning environment where all students can speak freely without fear of being ridiculed, devalued, or ostracized. And, he noted, the issue isn’t restricted to an individual classroom. “The idea of safe space or student comfort or trigger warning attaches itself to the idea of student empowerment and I think we need to be attentive to what they want to achieve without being dismissive and find ways to make it jive with our

responsibilities as educators”.

The problem, as he sees it, arises when a focus on safe spaces - or civility - is used by administrators, and sometimes unwittingly by students, to limit or invalidate ideas, perspectives, or pedagogy. In *Uncivil Rites*, Salaita’s recent book about the UIUC controversy and its fallout, he writes, “[Civility] is the pretext of the oppressor”. [p. 105] Expanding on the idea now, he said, “Civility as maintaining professional decorum is deeply important, but that’s not how upper administrators use it. There is something discomfitting about the articulation of politics that are at least tacitly tied into the maintenance of normative viewpoints and hierarchies.

“This”, he concluded, “is my beef with the term civility”.

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