

Battle for the Campuses: Israel's Lobby and the Suffocating Politics of Language

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Steven Salaita, *Uncivil Rites: Palestine and the Limits of Academic Freedom* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2015) Hardback \$22.95. 264 pp.

Steven Salaita's engrossing account of his dismissal by the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign (UIUC) is not only a lively page-turner, it is an extraordinary exposé of an issue perplexing on its face: that a foreign power has developed so effective a domestic campus lobby network that it has largely sabotaged both research and researchers in an area in which it is a protagonist: here, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Still, considering how this lobby operates requires first briefly acknowledging the enabling context for it. The modern research university, like its forebears in feudal times, is too often a sordid and opaque political environment, suggesting less the gleaming ivory tower of rationalism than the labyrinthine Library in *The Name of the Rose*. Even in countries generally believed to provide transparent and professional standards for principled and creative scholarly work, such as the United States and England, covert influences exert serious power in the shadows. Thus, junior scholars promoting an innovative thesis find their work and careers derailed by gate-keeping senior scholars whose corpus and reputation are threatened by the theoretical framework they are forwarding. Ideological filters, in turn, inspire peers to evaluate each other's quality as researchers, and even as teachers, not according to formalized standards but on how findings impact their own personal interests and emotions on matters to which they are personally committed: in this case a cherished nationalism. The supposed inadmissibility of such behavior itself inspires secretive backroom dealings rather than open honest argument. As the tumbrels of secretive influence turn, rights of reply evaporate. The perspicacious rising scholar grasps this reality at an early stage and carefully soft-pedals their sensitive views through departmental and college politics until the safe berth of tenure is gained—or, if merit pay, travel funds and other perks remain at stake, perhaps for the duration of their career. It is both impossible and unwise to read Salaita's account without recalling Tomas Kuhn's acid analysis of the sociology of scientific paradigm shifts.

Still, as Salaita's account demonstrates, nothing in this strangely feudal environment approaches the blistering sabotage that greets critical research on Israel and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. In this battle by self-appointed watch-lists and monitoring *hasbara* groups openly committed to stifling criticism of Israel on college campuses, even an angry personal tweet, inspired (as in Salaita's case) by a rush of

moral outrage at massive human suffering during Israel's 2014 attack on Gaza, can be brandished by Israel's defenders as evidence of "bias" and deployed to attack and wreck a faculty member's credibility and career.¹ A related unique pitfall is that the scholar's defensive efforts to explain to university administrations just what is going on—that is, that the attack represents a co-ordinated lobbying effort by Israel—encounter obstacles that exist nowhere else. Not least, the language needed to describe the attackers is almost unpronounceable because it rings so close to classic anti-Semitic language about a global Jewish conspiracy, *a la* Protocols of the Elders of Zion. Thus, the scholar finds both their views and their defense of them cast into the outer darkness, stigmatized as anti-Semitic racism.

It is indeed to cast the scholar into such impossible dilemmas that Israel's *basbara* networks have argued that criticism of Israel is by definition a form of anti-Semitism, especially when it extends to anti-Zionism (opposition to the idea of a Jewish state) or arguing that Israel's formation as a Jewish state is inherently racist. Due to concerted lobbying by Israel's networks, criticism of Israel has now been incorporated into definitions of anti-Semitism by the United States' State Department, the United Kingdom, and the European Union. The United States' version of anti-Semitism even includes the legally meaningless formula, "denying Israel the right to exist," while the European Union's definition includes "claiming that the existence of a State of Israel is a racist endeavor." Thus, those denouncing criticism of Israel as a mere cover for anti-Semitism—the "new anti-Semitism," as formulated in a sympathetic pro-Israel corpus—can now cite legal instruments that carry real legal clout.²

It is in this ominous environment that the term "Salaita" has obtained iconic significance. Steven Salaita is not primarily a scholar of Israel-Palestine; his academic discipline is comparative literature, specializing in the literature of Native Americans and Indigenous peoples. He has written on the similarities between the Native American issue and the Palestinian problem because the comparisons are myriad and engrossing. He has also let fly in the Twittersphere his anger and upset over Israel's policies toward Palestinians, in sometimes profane eruptions of moral outrage about which he is utterly unapologetic. (To sanctimonious and hypocritical denunciations of this language, he responds bluntly, "I cuss because why the fuck not?") These were the comments, made outside the formal scope of his academic work but inevitably informed by it, that were cited by his attackers as discrediting of his work as a scholar and his qualities as a teacher. The main charge was; therefore, not that he had been wrong but that he had been "uncivil." As the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign's Board of Trustees expressed it:

In the end, the University of Illinois will never be measured simply by the number of world-changing engineers, thoughtful philosophers or great artists we produce. We also have a respon-

sibility to develop productive citizens of our democracy. As a nation, we are only as strong as the next generation of participants in the public sphere. The University of Illinois must shape men and women who will contribute as citizens in a diverse and multi-cultural democracy. To succeed in this mission, we must constantly reinforce our expectation of a university community that *values civility as much as scholarship*. Disrespectful and demeaning speech that promotes malice is not an acceptable form of civil argument if we wish to ensure that students, faculty and staff are comfortable in a place of scholarship and education. If we educate a generation of students to believe otherwise, we will have jeopardized the very system that so many have made such great sacrifices to defend. There can be no place for that in our democracy, and therefore, there will be no place for it in our university.³

Taken at face value, this position provides no reason why incivility threatens democracy. “Civil,” in this formulation is associated simply with not making people uncomfortable. It is the meaning and politics of this “civility” edict that Salaita takes on in this small volume.

Since the ruling of a federal court in his favour, the facts of Salaita’s case are generally uncontested (he includes the key documents in an appendix). UIUC had provided him with an offer letter and, upon his acceptance of the position, the appointment letter with which all faculty are familiar, laying out his teaching and other responsibilities as well as benefits, such as research funds, and warm language about welcoming him to the UIUC faculty. Although all new hires are normally submitted to a Board of Trustees (BOT) for rubber-stamp, the appointment letter is universally understood in academe to have binding contractual force. Hence new faculty may teach for months before a BOT meeting convenes. On the basis of these letters, Salaita was therefore following well-established norms in assuming he had the job, resigning from his former position, renting out his house, and planning his move. Only on 1 August 2014 did he receive, with no other warning, a terse letter from UIUC Chancellor, Phyllis Wise, informing him that his appointment “would not be recommended for submission to the Board of Trustees” because its approval of his appointment was “unlikely.” Offering no other information or any right of reply, Wise had unilaterally reversed his appointment on the specious legal claim that his appointment had not been finalized by the BOT, and so he had not been fired.

Thus, in early August 2014, and far too late in the year to find any other academic job, he was abruptly unemployed, with a wife and child to support. Shocked and rattled, he was left to scramble for professional survival. In the long run, he would settle with UIUC for a cash settlement of \$600 000 plus legal fees

and, through the swift action of sympathetic colleagues, find a temporary post at the American University of Beirut. Some surrogate justice was achieved when Wise, accused of violating university ethics on other matters, resigned under pressure. But the debacle left Salaita bearing a scarlet letter in the media (and in those unseen back-channel academy closets of power) as “controversial professor Steven Salaita,” a distinction he had never wanted or dreamed of having.

The sheer drama of this affair brought a rare national spotlight to the reason for it. But two other factors operated to steer the scandal away from naming and shaming the original authors of it. First, for Salaita’s alarmed peers, the issue at stake was taken to be his academic freedom, as well as the right of an academic, as a private citizen, to express himself on social media in language that he would never use in a classroom. Academic freedom and freedom of expression, in these broad senses, draw instant, easy and ardent support from faculty who well know their importance. But it was far harder for this same body of supporters to confront the elephant in the room: that this hoopla had arisen only because the topic was Israel. A comparable scandal regarding a scholar’s off-the-cuff criticism of any other power—say, Putin’s Russia, Öcalan’s Turkey, or Duterte’s Philippines—would not imaginably generate attacks on a scholar’s qualifications to teach. Yet, so sensitive are the politics of Israel in domestic US affairs that even those fully aware that the pro-Israel lobby lay behind the attack on Salaita generally often found it impolitic to say so. That Israel was involved became only a referent rather than a substantive part of the analysis. Among the more insidious effects of Israel’s campaign to stifle debate on college campuses is that faculty peers ready to defend a colleague on free speech grounds tend to affirm their own neutrality on the subject of Palestine in order to have credibility as impartial actors. The effect is actually to further reticence about Israel’s policies toward Palestinians as well as Israel’s operations on US college campuses. To find analyses that track the State of Israel has organized such attacks requires going to sources such as the US Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions website—a source so clearly enmeshed in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict as to trigger caution among those seeking some mythical, “unbiased” high ground.

Second, campus battles about scholarship on Israel may convey the deliberate mistaken notion that the principal actors are a few honest, if possibly overzealous local people, and perhaps a supportive institution or two, motivated only by a principled abhorrence of anti-Semitism. (In Salaita’s case, these actors were identified as “concerned” UIUC faculty, students, and a significant donor who approached Chancellor Wise privately to demand that Salaita not join the faculty). In this illusion, on one side stands the individual scholar under assault, possibly flanked by a few sympathizers (in Salaita’s unusual case, this included nearly 20 000 faculty petitioners), or perhaps a student club that has undertaken advocacy of Palestinian rights as a cause or campaign. On the other side stands a few strident voices manifesting as local interests (faculty, students, and donors) claiming standing to express their concerns about the university’s policies. Actually, the latter side represents the

tip of a far larger and uniquely well-organized iceberg: the network of Israeli *hasbara* organizations operating nationally that share information, alerts, resources and training precisely to empower “local” activism. Since this network is difficult to describe without seeming to promote old-fashioned racist notions of global Jewish dominion, its description here is perhaps best taken from an allied forum, *Hadassab Magazine*, in 2011:

Israel advocacy groups [concerned with university campuses] work together under the umbrella of the *Israel on Campus Coalition*, a network of 33 national organizations. (Until recently, ICC was an arm of Hillel: The Foundation for Jewish Campus Life.) Some of the most active groups include Hillel, CAMERA, Hasbara [that is, Hasbara Fellowships], StandWithUs, The David Project and the [Zionist Organization of America]. They disseminate materials, promote leadership initiatives and tackle legal matters. Scholars for Peace in the Middle East organizes faculty and coordinates petition drives opposing BDS [the international campaign of boycott, divestment and sanctions against Israel]. The network of Jewish federations recently launched the *Israel Action Network* to catalyze responses to delegitimization efforts in civil and social spheres. *One of its primary areas of focus will be colleges*, partnering with the ICC, according to its director, Martin Raffel. Its projected three-year budget is \$1.7 million.⁴

Thus, a university administration, attacked for providing employment to a supposedly “anti-Semitic” professor, does not actually confront a local critic or a spontaneous letter campaign. Rather, it confronts the local expression of a well-integrated and trained international network developed precisely to serve the propaganda interests of a foreign power on university campuses throughout the nation.

The existence of this network requires a little fleshing out. Even a summary description would far exceed the scope of this review, but to suggest its flavour, two of its more notorious arms can be flagged as illustrative. The most infamous may be the openly McCarthyite Campus Watch, established in 2002 partly by orientalist scholar and committed Israeli propagandist, Daniel Pipes (cited as an extremist Islamophobe by the Southern Poverty Law Center). Campus Watch maintains a website providing a variety of resources to assist pro-Israeli attacks on academics and their work, including a list of “Professors to Avoid” on grounds that they “are most responsible for the politicization and bias sadly endemic to Middle East studies.” (This list now includes Steven Salaita, but also senior luminaries such as Africanist *eminence gris*, Mahmood Mamdani). A second, less-polished but more viciously toned organization is Canary Mission, run by students and “concerned individuals.” Like Campus Watch, Canary Mission maintains a database of institu-

tions and their faculty “to document the people and groups that are promoting hatred of the USA, Israel, and Jews on college campuses in North America” (full disclosure: its list of sinners includes the author of this essay). A larger group of organizations supports Israel’s battle on campuses as part of their agenda: for example, American Israeli Political Action Network (AIPAC), by far the most effective foreign lobby targeting the US Congress, runs an “AIPAC on Campus” program that assembles 400 student activists annually in Washington, DC, for intensive training in “pro-Israel political activism” designed to help them “grapple with the most challenging questions you face on campus as a supporter of Israel and develop action plans that will allow you to hit the ground running ...” The mission statements of these organizations may give a nod to academic freedom but otherwise state their political goals plainly. For example, from the Israel on Campus Coalition Mission statement:

We envision the American college campus as a place where supporters of Israel feel confident about openly celebrating the Jewish state, where dialogue and ideas are freely exchanged about Israel, *where the anti-Israel movement remains marginalized*, and where the entire campus community appreciates Israel’s contributions to the world. Our vision is long-term.⁵

That long-term vision has had material effects, as the number of academics targeted specifically for their scholarship critical of Israel continues to grow. In the first four months of 2015, for example, the non-profit group Palestine Legal recorded that, of cases brought to it by college faculty and students who had run into trouble for expressing support for Palestinian rights, sixty were accused of anti-Semitism and twenty four of terrorism. Of the 292 cases to which it responded in the eighteen months from 1 January 2014, through June 2015, 85 percent involved college students and faculty.

This short profile, necessarily abusing the actual scope of Israel’s advocacy operations on college campuses, supports some larger observations. First, it should be deeply troubling to anyone with a morsel of concern for the integrity of scholarship on world affairs that the interests of any foreign power are being promoted in American and British universities so baldly and for such clear political aims. Second, it is particularly worrying that this lobby has sabotaged principled academic research in a field of such vital importance to the US national interest as the Middle East. Third, it is even more worrying that this foreign power has had such remarkable success to date. In England, its interests have fed into the “Prevent” program, which not only authorizes university authorities to suppress any campus activity that may possibly create a “security” problem but *requires* them to do so. As ably summarized by Karma Nabulsi, Prevent’s impact on academic freedom has been chilling,⁶ not least because it is easy to cast events on Palestine as security threats

simply by sending some pro-Israeli activists to disrupt a few of them. In one example known to this author, Prevent logics manifested in the cancelling of a long-scheduled academic conference at Southampton University in 2014, forcing its relocation, after two years of delay that included a High Court case, to a university in Cork, Ireland. In another case, it inspired two university administrations (at Middlesex University London and the University of East London) to the unprecedented cancellations of long-scheduled talks by the eminent jurist Richard Falk, after his talk at the London School of Economics was briefly disturbed by obstreperous pro-Zionist audience members.

In the US, the campaign against criticism of Israel has not (yet) extended to Prevent-style monitoring and government-ordered censorship, but it has inspired a new emphasis on “civility” almost as hair-raising. As deployed by university leaderships in this context, “civil” is meant to signify respectful exchange, tempered language, and being generally nice about differences of opinion. In practice, it requires that participants abjure any tone or language that might upset anyone else, even (implicitly, by failure to omit them) those committing crimes against humanity in the name of what they believe is a just or sacred cause. This view simply skips over the problem that students and faculty cannot imaginably protest such crimes in terms that those committing them would find civil. For instance, it is a given that citing Israel, on the most rigorous evidence and in the coolest academese, for operating as an apartheid regime is going to seem uncivil to somebody.

Furthermore, “civil” here reflects the infamous liberal fallacy that human conflicts fundamentally reflect an inability to grasp each other’s points of view or “see each other as human beings.” In this sanguine view, differences are best overcome through civil (polite, respectful) dialogue that allows all concerned to engage safely in “free debate” in order to “make up their own minds.” The appearance of neutrality by the professor is considered essential to providing students with the safe space necessary to express themselves and explore thorny problems with full intellectual freedom. This author knows of no faculty member who contests this mandate, and Salaita points out that he has never been criticized by his own students for “bias.” Yet, this view fails over two embedded fallacies. First, it omits any consideration of competing interests: that, for example, colonial conquests seeking land and resources have been inspired by the cold quest for economic gain and have nothing to do with recognizing the Indigenous peoples as human beings. Second, it omits consideration that the academic mission would seem bound to take a side to preserve its own integrity. What is the proper role of academics when teaching about the Nazi Shoah, for example? Confronting the death camps, when does “neutrality” in the classroom become not only impossible but professionally inadmissible?

Hence the title of Steven Salaita’s book, *Uncivil Rites*, in which he takes on the enervating liberal fantasy of civility by exposing its fundamental error: that the very norms of civility, as composed by a dominating power, serve continuing dom-

ination by rendering “uncivil” any critique that disturbs and disables that dominion. A civil challenge to such a scheme is impossible because civility is pre-defined by the colonizer to enable erasure, censorship, and conquest.⁷ *Civil* also connotes the antithesis of the barbaric, the savage, the unruly—that is, Indigenous peoples, those benighted *indios*, Native Americans, Aborigines, black Africans or Arabs whose lives and cultures have been trampled by the colonial *misión civilizatrice*. In short, “civility” is a term of power, in that the colonized cannot challenge the colonizer in any terms that the colonizer will consider civil. “Civility exists in the lexicon of conquest,” Salaita writes. “It is the language of Cotton Mather’s diatribes [urging the extermination of Native Americans]. It is the discourse of educated racism. It is the sanctimony of the authoritarian. It is the pretext of the oppressor (105). Specific words and tone are actually irrelevant: “criticism of Israel is necessarily intemperate no matter the tone and language by which it is conducted” (118). In a grimly amusing chapter about “hideous” Chief Illiniwik, the fake-Indian sports emblem at UIUC forcibly retired in 2008 on grounds of being racially offensive, Salaita ties the Palestinian dilemma to the politics of Indigenous peoples generally.

Salaita does not deny the partial intellectual autonomy of the individual scholar, nor does he make any sweeping charge that all university administrators lack moral integrity and fortitude. (It would be churlish for this writer not to attest that her own university’s administration stood firm in a recent comparable crunch). But, he does argue that the limits of civility on college campuses, as enforced by university leaderships, are structural, reflecting the university’s appropriation by neoliberal capitalist logics and motivations. The university’s “brand” supports the prestige and associated cushy salaries of university leaderships. It is this brand that they therefore seek zealously to defend from the scandal promised by pro-Israeli histrionics.

The challenge Salaita identifies therefore goes beyond any question of tone to query the scholar’s moral responsibilities. What is the role of civility regarding any grotesquely uncivil behavior, such as aerial bombing of a defenseless civilian population? Are there no circumstances in which incivility is not only understandable but ethically imperative? Just how civil must we remain, even in the Twitter-sphere, about crimes against humanity in order to retain our academic bona fides? How do standards of civility apply moment by moment to those of us viewing in horror a human rights debacle, such as Israel’s pulverizing the captive population of the Gaza Strip, while images of collapsing buildings and dead civilians are unfolding before our eyes? Is civility truly due to the authors of such actions? Thus, the quandary Salaita poses: if “civility” is taken at face value—as signifying universal values and mutual respect, presuming the equality of everyone in dignity and rights—at what point is it actually civil to be “uncivil,” or uncivil to be “civil?”

The core of this argument appears in Chapter Two of Salaita’s short book, in a discussion that could serve as a required reading for college courses in several disciplines. In other chapters, he brings the entire affair to life through personal vi-

gnettes: for instance, how a frantic and failed dive to save his toddler from a dangerous fall triggered anxiety so intense that his wife eventually observed, “You have to stop reading about Gaza” (175). The sheer charm of these little stories adds humanizing nuance to the dilemmas he faces and challenges us to probe, turning what could be a thudding argument about academic freedom into a page-turner account of one man’s philosophical crisis, with applications for us all.

To some extent, Salaita’s case stands today as a victory for academic freedom: the university’s arguments for his dismissal were trashed by a federal court; a substantial monetary compensation was awarded; his reputation as a talented scholar of Native American literature was saved, at least among his peers; and his unemployment was relieved by another institution, at least in the short haul, leaving a lasting dust of shame over UIUC in his wake. But that victory, nonetheless, left a poisonous fallout rightly observed warily by any academic, encouraging of tactical retreat more than firm stands. Salaita remains “controversial professor Steven Salaita” for reasons no better than his unwillingness to express himself in language Israel finds civil. He may be admired, but no one wants to be the next Salaita. Yet, until the “campus watch” politics of Israel-Palestine is confronted, its agents exposed and their mission absolutely discredited, the academy will remain vulnerable to sabotage by a foreign lobby all too skilled in holding our academic freedom hostage to rules of civility used to censor, shame, and intimidate its critics into silence.

NOTES

¹ “Hasbara” is translated into Hebrew as “explanation” but the distinction attempted by, say, Israel’s Foreign Ministry between hasbara-as-explanation and hasbara-as-propaganda are strained and unconvincing.

² On the State Department’s definition, see “Defining Anti-Semitism” (20 January 2017), accessed on 28 May 2017, at:

<https://www.state.gov/s/rga/resources/267538.htm>; On the European Union’s definition, see the European Parliament Working Group on Anti-Semitism, “Working Definition of Anti-Semitism,” accessed 28, May 2017, at: <http://www.antisem.eu/projects/cumc-working-definition-of-antisemitism/>; The United Kingdom’s definition is drawn from the EUMC definition: See the government-sponsored article, accessed 28 May 2017, at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/a-definition-of-antisemitism>.

³ See Christopher Kennedy *et al*, “Open Letter from the Board of Trustees,” accessed 24 May 2017, AT: <https://illinois.edu/massmail/massmail/27181.html>

⁴ Rahel Musleah, “Defending Israel on Campus,” *Hadassah Magazine*, April 2011.

⁵ Israel on Campus Coalition, “About,” accessed 21 May 2017, at: <https://israelcc.org/about-icc/>.

⁶ Karma Nabulsi, “Don’t Go to the Doctor,” *London Review of Books* Vol. 39 No. 10; accessed 18, May 2017, at: <https://www.lrb.co.uk/v39/n10/karma-nabulsi/dont-go-to-the-doctor>.

⁷ Critical thinking is defined by Salaita as “acting in some way on the knowledge it produces, if only in the formulation of a dynamic ethnical worldview” (159).