

The Salaita case and Middle East studies

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On September 11, the University of Illinois Board of Trustees will vote on whether or not to honor an employment contract that Professor Steven Salaita signed with the university's campus at Urbana-Champaign, to join the Department of American Indian Studies there. The board of trustees meeting will be the culmination of a nearly six-week-long saga which began when the Chancellor of the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, Phyllis Wise, wrote to Professor Salaita, indicating that she would not even pass his contract along to the board for approval, as she expected that it would be rejected.

This news was utterly perplexing to those of us in the academic community who heard it back in early August. These board of trustee approvals of appointments are usually a matter of routine, and frequently take place after the appointees have already filled their positions on campus. Indeed, Professor Salaita had already resigned his former academic position and moved to Illinois to prepare for the new academic term, during which he was slated to teach courses in his new department. The news was all the more bewildering because no reason for the chancellor's decision was given in her initial letter to Professor Salaita. Moreover, she had neglected to consult with or even to inform the head of the department who had hired Professor Salaita.

Nevertheless, word soon began to spread that the decision to withdraw the job offer was related to a series of tweets, which Professor Salaita had written during the recent conflict in Gaza. And the chancellor would, weeks later, confirm as much when she accused Professor Salaita of a lack of 'civility' in those tweets.

This case has generated an enormous amount of commentary and debate, both among academics in North America generally and specifically within the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign community. The debate has revolved around a range of issues: whether Professor Salaita's tweets were reflections of intolerance or, rather, intended as ironic commentary on Israel's claims in the Gaza conflict; whether the style or substance of extramural tweets are relevant to the fitness of professors to teach; whether university administrators have the responsibility to consult widely with faculty on important issues of governance; and, perhaps most importantly, whether constitutional protections of speech

and university commitments to academic freedom still have substance in this day and age.

I have to confess that this debate has left me quite shaken, on a distinctly personal level. Like most university professors, I am very sensitive to encroachments upon academic freedom. But for me, this was no abstract case. This was a colleague in my own field of research, Middle Eastern studies, who found himself suddenly fired for making the apparent mistake of expressing himself on an issue of central concern to his life. And this “mistake” took place well beyond the precincts of the university, nowhere near a classroom, in a virtual, electronic realm.

To strike in this way at the professionalism of such a productive and well-respected colleague feels, at times, like an affront to all who have taken up Middle Eastern studies as a field of scholarly inquiry. It almost seems to suggest that we, in this admittedly much contested field, are incapable of the professionalism that our colleagues in other fields maintain, because our material is too sensitive, too emotional. And of course, those of us with a family connection to the Middle East – like Professor Salaita, a Palestinian-American, or myself, an Egyptian-Canadian – are unsurprisingly assumed to be far ‘too close’ to this sensitive, emotional material. I think I hardly need explain the implicit racism in such assumptions that, while most often left unstated for propriety’s sake, are plainly relevant to those rendering judgment.

I doubt I have met a colleague in Middle Eastern studies who isn’t passionate about what he or she studies, regardless of his or her national origin. To work in this field takes commitment, very often involving the study of a difficult language and then living in a place far from home for a period of years. Under such circumstances, one cannot help but feel passionately about those among whom one has lived – about those whose stories one has committed to tell. And frankly, who would want a teacher who wasn’t passionate in this way? Who would want a teacher who wasn’t excited about, and involved with, his or her subject matter?

To my mind, a university is a place for the airing of passions – certainly not the silencing of them. The best professors, like Professor Salaita, ensure that all these passions are aired, debated, critiqued, and scrutinized in their classrooms. These professors know from their life-long experiences as learners themselves that understanding comes about only as a product of discussion, and never from an imposition of thought upon the other.

In the midst of all the strife and hardship that currently befalls the region on which we work

as Middle East scholars, the need for our engagement in both scholarly and public debate is arguably greater than ever before. And yet here we have a case that strikes at our very existence as Middle East scholars in North American academia. The unmistakable lesson of the episode is that every Middle East scholar is potentially at risk of dismissal, not only for behavior inside the classroom, but as in Professor Salaita's case, for behavior outside it.

I am left with the question: If those of us who are concerned with telling the stories of the less privileged and the less powerful ultimately find ourselves censored or, even worse, censoring ourselves for fear of administration reprisal, who will help students and the public understand all that strife, all that hardship currently plaguing the Middle East?