

Bold step to defend professor's freedom of speech

After job offer is revoked, boycott is organized to change university's mind

BY MARC PARRY
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On a Friday night in early August, Prof. Corey Robin put out a call on his blog. There had been plenty of grumbling over the University of Illinois's decision to revoke a job offer to Prof. Steven G. Salaita, who gained notoriety for incendiary tweets about Israel. But it had not been enough to persuade the university to reinstate Professor Salaita. So Professor Robin, a political theorist at the City University of New York's Brooklyn College, ratcheted up the pressure.

He suggested that scholars in every field begin organizing public statements refusing to accept any invitations to speak on any campus of the University of Illinois, a serious disruption of academic business.

"Nobody's gonna do this," Mr. Robin remembers telling his wife. But, to his surprise, they did. Philosophers, citing CoreyRobin.com, took up the challenge. The boycotts snowballed. English professors. Political scientists. Anthropologists. All signed on, and Mr. Robin blogged each fresh step. By his last count, more than 5,000 scholars had joined boycotts.

The Salaita affair has riveted academe. One story line that has drawn less attention is the role played by Mr. Robin. For more than a month, he has turned his blog into a Salaita war room.

"We've all looked to him as a central source of information about new developments," said Katherine Franke, a Columbia law professor who has advised Mr. Salaita's legal team.

Mr. Robin, 46, cut his political teeth as a graduate-student union activist at Yale University, where he led a controversial mid-1990s grade strike. By the time the Salaita story broke, he had already fought in a series of Israel-Palestine-related battles at the City University of New York.

"A lot of people see him as an intellectual leader," said Michael Kazin, a professor of history at Georgetown University and co-editor of the magazine *Dissent*. "He can be counted on to battle people."

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Now Mr. Robin is struggling to figure out a path forward in the wake of the Illinois Board of Trustees' Sept. 11 vote against Mr. Salaita. "We're trying to preserve the academy as a space for people to actually be able to think and to speak without fear and without intimidation," he said in an interview.

Mr. Robin is something of an odd fit for his current role. Although people constantly ask him to speak about the Israel-Palestine question, he turns down the invitations because he does not consider himself an expert on the subject. His current scholarship focuses on the political theory of capitalism. His last book, "The Reactionary Mind" (Oxford University Press), was a much-debated collection of essays about conservatism.

A Jewish professor who attends a Conservative synagogue in Brooklyn, he long ago came to consider himself an anti-Zionist. But he was always quiet about it. It was painful to talk about, particularly among Jews.

Then, in early 2011, Mr. Robin went through an episode not unlike the Salaita affair. Brooklyn College rescinded the appointment of a graduate student, Kristofer Petersen-Overton, who had been hired by the political science department to teach a course on Middle East politics. The student accused the college of succumbing to opposition from critics of his work.

The college president and CUNY's chancellor had each received a letter from Dov Hikind, a Brooklyn assemblyman and CUNY alumnus, complaining about the "slanted nature" of Mr. Petersen-Overton's writings. Mr. Hikind told *The New York Times* that he had spent 20 hours immersing himself in Mr. Petersen-Overton's output, and "it was all about Israel being the bad guys in every way." Protests succeeded in restoring the scholar's job.

Last year, however, Mr. Robin's department found itself in yet another Israel imbroglio. The department came under pressure to pull its co-sponsorship of a planned event about B.D.S., the movement that backs boycotts, divestment and sanctions against Israel.

Two aspects of that campaign were particularly chilling, according to the department's then-chairman, Paisley Currah. One, Representative Jerrold Nadler, Democrat of New York, and 18 other legislators publicly demanded that the department withdraw its endorsement of the event. And two, a group of 10 City Council members issued what the department chairman described as "an explicit threat" to CUNY's funding.

The event went ahead, with the department's sponsorship, after Mr. Robin's side mobilized and Michael R. Bloomberg, then the mayor of New York, intervened: And Mr. Robin ended up blogging about the controversy. A lot.

Recent years have radicalized his views on the role of the academy in Israel debates. Previously, he didn't have a position on B.D.S. and even sympathized with critics who questioned the relevance of such boycotts.

He now supports the movement. "I think the academy actually is quite important on the Israel debate," he says.

Mr. Robin sees his activism on the Salaita and other cases as an extension of his work in political theory. His first book probed the politics of fear. He has long been interested in issues of intimidation and coercion.

He argues that, in a legally constrained liberal society, the private, non-state sector often becomes the sphere in which coercion happens on behalf of the state. He offers the McCarthy period as an example. Most of McCarthyism, he says, took place at the level of the workplace, where as much as 40 percent of the American work force was subjected to political investigation and surveillance for their beliefs.

"And here we come to the question of Israel-Palestine," he says. "Where do you see the bulk of coercion and censorship happening? It's happening in the nonstate sector — in the universities."

Mr. Robin's stances have drawn criticism from fellow academics, not just politicians. Jonathan Marks, a professor of politics at Ursinus College who blogs for the magazine *Commentary*, has argued that Mr. Robin has attached himself to a B.D.S. movement "that seeks to persuade academics and students to make extreme pronouncements about matters they don't know much about."

Those uninformed foreign-policy statements "break down the wall between scholarship and propagandizing and so make our colleges, universities, and associations vulnerable to outside interference of the sort Robin is now deploring," Mr. Marks wrote in an email.

In the Salaita case, Todd Gitlin, a professor of journalism and sociology at Columbia University, has faulted Mr. Robin for failing to engage with the substance of Mr. Salaita's tweets.

Mr. Robin acknowledges "deliberately not engaging in the content."

"The serious thing to do is to figure out what's actually happening," he said. "An outspoken critic of Israel, speaking in an inflammatory way about it, being punished and drummed out of the academy — that's what's happening."

Getting into the details of the tweets, he says, is "missing the forest for the trees."

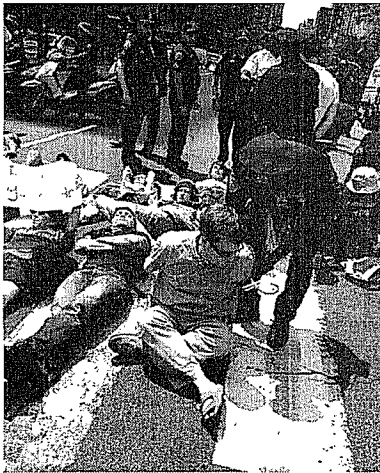
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MARK ABRAMSON

Corey Robin, a political theorist at Brooklyn College, above, objected to the University of Illinois's decision to revoke a job offer to a professor who posted on Twitter about Israel. Mr. Robin was arrested at the Israeli mission while protesting the war in Gaza, right.



COURTESY OF COREY ROBIN