

The Uncultured Wars - Arabs, Muslims, and the Poverty of Liberal Thought

Review of Steven Salaita's Latest Book

By [Jim Miles](#)

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“The Uncultured Wars” comprises an excellent series of thought provoking essays, the excellence deriving from their ability to provoke thought that should be one of the hallmarks of academic works. As such Steven Salaita writes as an advocate of a position rather than pretending dispassionate objectivity, or “myth of disinterest” in Salaita’s own words. I will return to that idea later as for my own personal interests it is contained in one of his more interesting essays. Generally, these essays are well constructed, leading the reader to consider how subtle and yet how obvious racism is in the U.S., Arab/Muslim racism in particular.

Salaita’s introduction discusses the medium of the essay as a format to represent ideas and helps define what I have always thought, but perhaps not with the same clarity: “...most newspaper columnists are corporate exhibitionists, not essayists. Or, to be fair, most of them are simply bad essayists.” Salaita’s essays are mostly highly academic, using language that would be difficult for many readers, yet I would estimate that the targeted audience is that of academia, the liberal press, and others that are - or should be - discussing the ideas of liberal thought within the context of racism, terrorism, culture, and morality. Whether they would recognize themselves within that context is open to their own interpretations.

The introductory essay, “Anti-Arab racism, American liberals, and the new civilian terrorists” looks at the defining features of Arab racism through a critique of media and their view of current events. Current events at the time of writing were the Israeli attacks against the Lebanese population - and unfortunately every place where Lebanon came into this argument, Gaza could be readily inserted without changing the argument or the descriptors of events. Salaita starts with a couple of “exemplars” of anti-Arab racism, using Dershowitz’s writing in *The Nation*, Ruth Conniff in *The Progressive*, and Richard Cohen in the *Washington Post*. He arrives at his definition with “the most consistent feature of anti-Arab racism” being the “incessant equation of Arabs with ruthless, innate violence devoid of the context invariably granted every instance of American or Israeli aggression.”

The corollary is also true if one takes ‘American or Israeli aggression’ as being ruthless, innate violence as it too is always removed from the context that it is to protect the elites holding on to the privileges of power. The latter leads to Salaita’s definition of being anti-racist as “being willing to sacrifice privilege to the benefits of all humans.” A short simple statement but it carries significant truth. He then exorcises the liberal position of tolerance, recognizing that tolerance does not equate to equality or anti-racism, but rather, “reflects their unwillingness to undertake what is necessary to eliminate racism.”

The other essays extend his thoughts, developed from a combination of personal experiences and academic thought, creating a picture of some subtle some not so subtle moments of 'liberal' racism, apart from the obvious in your face racism of the jingoistic neocons and their purely ignorant followers. In "indispensably expendable" he criticizes - attacks - liberal morality, using an incident involving Jerry Falwell and a black boy (that's a teaser, go read the essay).

Next, in "I was called up to commit genocide" he discusses how the descriptor Arab-Christian is used to present arguments on Islam and Palestine. In essence, he puts forth two positions: first that he should not have to be labelled as Christian for his beliefs and statements to be acknowledged and accepted; and secondly, that the Muslim voice should not be dismissed and "Americans...should take Muslims and their grievances seriously." Arab Christians should not be "privileged" to speak for all Muslims, at the same time as Palestinians they do represent a Palestinian nation to the point of "reject[ing] Christian Zionist doctrine as false teaching that corrupts the biblical message of love, justice, and reconciliation." After presenting a series of arguments to support his view, the same Christian Zionists are described as not "intellectually disposed to nuance." He highlights the false use of statistics taken out of context - the emigration of Palestinian Christians, Christians who suffered the same fate as their Muslim brethren, with "tens of thousands of Palestinian Christians...displaced at various points since 1948, and to classify this displacement as emigration would be a gross bastardization of history."

In two essays, the popular culture media come under criticism. In "Michael Moore does it again" the critique is directed at Moore's simplistic juxtaposition of events to highlight his arguments, providing the example of the wonderfulness of Canadian universal healthcare (it is good, better than many, but slowly becoming more strongly two tiered) and the problems with U.S. healthcare provision, of which there are many. As Moore's film "Sicko" is devoted to the sensationalizing of the health care crisis, Salaita takes exception to Moore's presentation of the 9/11 heroes healthcare juxtaposed to the inmates of Guantanamo healthcare without providing the context of the inmates being tortured and captive, Muslim, held without recourse to any normal judicial rights.

The second media event "Is Jackass unjustifiable?" questions the role of using a highly caricatured 'Arab' in one of the skits ultimately intended to embarrass the actor playing the Arab. While he does not personally have trouble with the skit, he does impart "blame to the cultural paradigms to which the jackasses merely responded." I haven't seen the movie and do not intend to, but it makes me wonder more broadly - jackasses as ironic caricature statements on all U.S. culture?

The essays continue, with journeys to Virginia Tech's incidence of terror, Michael Lerner's obviously biased 'liberal' Zionist (an oxymoron for sure) views, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's visit to Columbia, and the zealotry of atheism. The most powerful essay personally is "The perils and profits of doing comparative work."

In "Perils and Profits" Salaita discusses ideas surrounding the establishment of Native or Indigenous studies as a field of work. In sum, he works through to the idea that "Indigenous scholarship...is fundamentally seditious, and it is intrinsically comparative." Seditious as in its true form it questions the position of indigenous cultures within the - usually - over-riding cultures, whether it is the recognition of native cultures arising from genocidal activities in both North and South America or Palestinians being dispossessed or ethnically cleansed in

Israel/Palestine.

One of the few points where I was not sure what Salaita really meant was his discussion of 'comparative' approaches to indigenous studies. He asks, "Does acknowledging difference among peoples doom comparative approaches or does it sharpen their foci?" A true comparison is not just similarities, but similarities and differences: every similarity can generate a difference; every difference will contain within it the seed of commonality. Comparative studies will create a list of similarities and differences. If the differences are ignored the study becomes superficial and possibly too much of the feel good tolerance he does not like elsewhere in his essays. Perhaps I simply have not understood his arguments within this section.

An argument that he does present and that I support fully is his stand against the so-called objective, dispassionate, disinterested neutral academic representation. There truly are no objective articles written anywhere as even if an article purports to work only with 'the facts' the choice of which facts are chosen reveals a bias. In particular for native studies, he argues they should be "activist and proactive" leading to the "desirable outcome" of "undermin[ing] colonial systems and restor[ing] better ways of living..." He describes the idea of an "objective and disengaged scholar" as "a traditional and entrenched notion" (ironically perhaps with some truth considering how disengaging and boring many university level lectures are - but it also reeks of another form of elitism). A later description uses the words of "traditional academic ethos, which maintains the erstwhile myth of disinterest," underlining perhaps how uninfluential the academic world truly is except for their self-supporting compatriots.

This feigned aloofness becomes a prop in the protection of the academic role of self-replication. It is "the epitome of proper culture," a "deception of objectivity." It becomes a prop of "authority and authenticity" which tries to deny any real criticism, to remove any morality for decisions based on the ideas, without allowing any real comparison between the academics actions and thought, thus truly supporting the status quo of that group.

Salaita uses the word "advocate" as in "I advocate comparative work most avidly," as every position truly advocates one's own personal point of view, pretence of disinterest notwithstanding. Any good writer, any thinker willing to share and discuss ideas will advocate a position, but further will be able to modify and correct their viewpoint according to new information and informed arguments both for and against the original viewpoint.

As an advocate, Salaita's work provides strong support to his idea of Arab racism and the lack of truly critical liberal moral thought within the U.S. However, according to his definitions I would have to give up my own self definition as a member of the liberal left, as those terms as usurped by U.S. media - and within Salaita's own writing as part of that culture - mean something different than what the Oxford dictionary provides. Salaita's advocacy is towards an ever increasing awareness of the Arab racism that is dominant in current U.S. - and extended globally to all indigenous cultures - academic, political, and media thought. It provides valuable discussion and many scenarios that should be examined and discussed by all 'liberal' arts program students, all academics who work towards a fully egalitarian system of society around the world.

Jim Miles is a Canadian educator and a regular contributor/columnist of opinion pieces and book reviews for The Palestine Chronicle. Miles' work is also presented globally through other alternative websites and news publications.

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