THE SACKING OF PROFESSOR PROTESS:

On March 17, Eric Caine was freed from a maximum-security prison after spending twenty-five years behind bars for a double murder he did not commit. Caine’s release came after Northwestern University journalism professor David Protess, director of the Medill Innocence Project, and his students uncovered evidence that Caine had been brutally beaten by a detective into confessing. Caine was the twelfth wrongly convicted prisoner that Protess and his students have helped free, including five from death row.

Yet the same week he should have been celebrating, Protess received some very bad news. John Lavine, dean of the Medill School of Journalism, curtly informed him that he would not be teaching his world-renowned journalism class in the spring quarter. After thirty years of teaching, his career at Northwestern was seemingly over—with no explanation.

For nearly three years Protess has been locked in a battle with Cook County State’s Attorney Anita Alvarez over an unprecedented subpoena demanding all the records of Protess and his students concerning the case of Anthony McKinney, who Protess alleges has been behind bars for nearly thirty-five years for a murder he did not commit. After initially defending Protess, Northwestern turned against him last fall, siding with prosecutors on the subpoena.

I took Protess’s class at Northwestern and worked on McKinney’s case. Watching this drama unfold, I’m deeply disturbed by how prosecutors in Chicago, with an assist from my alma mater, have attacked our reporting and attempted to undermine our work. The wrongful imprisonment of McKinney, which nine successive teams of students at Medill helped to uncover, has been tragically ignored amid the media sideshow.

Protess’s suspension raises disturbing questions about the future of one of the country’s foremost journalism schools. Recently, Lavine, whose specialty is media marketing, successfully pushed to change the school’s name to the Medill School of Journalism, Media, Integrated Marketing Communications. Protess has become a casualty of a regime that now cares more about marketing than investigative journalism. “The direction of the school and the direction of the work I’m doing are moving on opposite tracks,” he says. ARI BERMAN

REMEMBERING BOB FITCH: My old friend Robert Fitch, a brilliant and prolific radical journalist and troublemaker, died on March 4 at 72. Sadly, too few people know what a loss that is. I first met Bob in the late 1980s. I’d just read “Planning New York,” his fantastic essay about the 1929 plan for New York City, drawn up by the Regional Plan Association, which outlined an auto-centered metropolitan region, including the highway system that would later be attributed to Robert Moses. One’s casual impression of the city is that it’s unplanned and chaotic, but Bob’s essay detailed just how much the physical and social evolution of New York City has been precisely planned by elites.

Much of the friendship that followed was conducted on the phone. We talked endlessly about the role of Wall Street and the real estate elite in planning the city (themes of his 1996 book, The Assassination of New York). So much of what’s attributed to anonymous global forces—like the deindustrialization of the city and its transformation into a global postindustrial metropolis—were consciously guided by bankers, developers and their hired hands. They used all the instruments of state power—subsidies, zoning laws, eminent domain—to get their way.

Normally, progressives blame Republicans for this sort of thing. But New York was, until recently, a Democratic town. And on the stuff that really mattered, like budgets and land use, they were always loyal servants of their corporate masters. Today people bemoan the rule of billionaire Mayor Mike Bloomberg, but it’s unlikely that a Democrat would have done anything different. I doubt I’d understand that had I not spent so much time talking with Bob.

It wasn’t all analysis, though. Bob tried several times to put together groups of intellectuals and activists to devise an alternative economic strategy for New York. I worked with him on several of those efforts, but we could never get it off the ground. There was no funding, no institutional base and too few willing to risk alienating the Democrats or the unions by signing on.

To my regret, I’d fallen out of touch with Bob in recent years, and had just resolved to reverse that. I missed his mind—and, though he could be a prickly character, his warmth. Rest in peace, Bob. They don’t make many like you. DOUG HENWOOD

MICHIGAN MONARCHY: In the summer of 1776, Thomas Jefferson outlined the most egregious acts of King George III. “For taking away our Charters, abolishing our most valuable Laws, and altering fundamentally the Forms of our Governments: For suspending our own Legislatures, and declaring themselves invested with power to legislate for us in all cases whatsoever,” Jefferson argued in the Declaration of Independence, the king was engaged in “the Establishment of an absolute Tyranny over these States.”

Well, imagine the surprise of Michiganders when they woke up 235 years into the American experiment to find that their governor was claiming the authority to declare a financial emergency and replace elected local officials with “emergency financial managers.” Under a law passed in mid-March by the Republican-controlled legislature, Governor Rick Snyder essentially has financial martial-law powers. If he determines that a city or school district is experiencing financial difficulties—and what community in Michigan isn’t these days?—he can replace its elected officials with managers who are permitted under the law to assume all their powers.

These “emergency financial managers” can be private individuals allied with the governor or even corporations with “consulting” contracts. They can cancel local labor contracts, cut or eliminate social services, and even begin processes of dissolving existing units of government and forcing mergers of cities and school districts.

Many in Michigan hope that the courts will reject Snyder’s power grab as unconstitutional. But no matter what happens, the governor has tried to assume the powers of a monarch, precisely the powers that the founders saw as necessitating revolution. But Michigan’s revolution can be a peaceful and democratic one, as its state constitution allows for Snyder’s recall, with the process beginning as soon as July. JOHN NICHOLS