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The B.D.S. Movement and Anti-Semitism on Campus

By ERIC ALTERMAN MARCH 29, 2016

THE casual consumer of campus-related news might be forgiven for assuming that anti-Semitic intimidation is breaking out all over. Where I teach, at Brooklyn College of the City University of New York, arguments over a proposed event or demonstration regarding Israel and Palestine appear every few months, and sometimes turn ugly.

In 2013, some Jewish students were forced out of a lecture sponsored by Students for Justice in Palestine. Just recently, a few members of the same organization broke up a faculty council meeting with demands that included barring “Zionists” from the campus.

In both cases, the culprits were appropriately and unambiguously condemned by the Brooklyn College president, Karen Gould. And while circumstances vary, controversies over the movement to boycott, divest from and sanction Israel, or B.D.S. for short, have taken place recently at Brown, Oberlin, Vassar and the University of California, among others.

At private colleges and universities, pressure to suppress pro-boycott activities is usually administered quietly by donors or alumni and rarely makes the news. But

at publicly funded institutions, boycott-related arguments often inspire politicians to try to legislate punishment if the school refuses to shut them down.

The battle for free speech on campus won two victories last week. First, the University of California rejected part of a draft report by the state regents that explicitly equated anti-Zionism with anti-Semitism in its condemnation of the latter.

Second, Gov. Andrew M. Cuomo has apparently reconsidered his original idea to cut \$485 million from the CUNY budget— a budget that the Senate Republican majority passed in a surprise session March 14 as a way to “send a message” to CUNY to take a harder line regarding what it considers to be the university’s anti-Semitism problem.

Anti-Semitism is no doubt a problem on many college campuses. And the boycott Israel movement — which has inspired these arguments — is tainted with it. I have long been a vocal B.D.S. opponent at CUNY and helped to found a national organization of academics to fight it, and I’ve experienced the nastiness firsthand. Still, as obnoxious as some of its followers can be, the boycott movement on campus is thriving not because of, but in spite of, the anti-Semitism of some of its adherents.

Indeed, it is filled with young Jews. The pro-boycott group Jewish Voice for Peace is perhaps the fastest-growing Jewish organization on campuses nationwide. And many liberal Zionists share the movement’s complaints about the brutality and self-defeating nature of Israel’s nearly 50-year occupation, even if they believe B.D.S. language and tactics to be counterproductive to the goal of a peaceful, two-state solution — to say nothing of the movement’s contravention of principles of free expression.

This is what happened to CUNY, with that surprise session initiated by Republicans in the State Senate. As was the case with the California regents, a single Jewish organization was behind the anti-CUNY campaign. In California, it was the Amcha Initiative, one of whose founders was quoted in this newspaper over the weekend explaining that “B.D.S. is in virtually all of its aspects anti-Semitic.” With CUNY, it was the far-right Zionist Organization of America making the same argument. These accusations of anti-Semitism were then magnified by conservative columnists and repeated by the Republican state senators.

But contrary to what the state senators claimed, CUNY administrators did not ignore the accusations. They hired two former federal prosecutors to examine the complaints of anti-Semitism and “recommend appropriate action.” CUNY has also established a working group to go over its policies relating to the boundaries of acceptable speech. Abraham Foxman, the former director of the Anti-Defamation League and an alumnus of CUNY, has praised the university’s handling of these isolated incidents. And, to borrow a phrase, when it comes to anti-Semitism, if Abe Foxman is not worried, I’m not worried.

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Moreover, the notion that the people behind the worst of this behavior are anything but a loud and obnoxious minority is belied by the reality of everyday life on campus. Aside from Facebook and Twitter posts, where anonymity often invites abuse, I’ve never heard a single anti-Semitic syllable uttered on any CUNY campus in the dozen years I’ve been on the faculty. My classes on Jewish history and culture often discuss extremely delicate questions of Jewish identity without anyone, Jew or gentile, evincing the slightest discernible discomfort. (Well, one traditionally Orthodox undergraduate once called Woody Allen and Philip Roth “worse than the goyim.”)

The notion that politicians can demand that a university prohibit certain types of political speech it finds politically distasteful by threatening its funding not only makes martyrs of those whom it seeks to silence, it also bespeaks a lack of confidence both in its own beliefs and in the value of reason itself.

The rabbinic sage Yossi Ben Zimra would recognize these campaigns as so much motzira-making, or malicious gossip. Regarding CUNY, I'd call it shameful to see such tactics deployed against so proud and significant an institution in the history of American Jews, and now an invaluable educational lifeline to millions of recent immigrants and hardworking, largely low-income students.

By protecting the right to free speech and expression, while simultaneously demanding civility and respectful discourse on all sides, universities can take care of these problems without political threats that undermine the very purpose of the university itself.

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