

Academic Boycotts and Professional Responsibility

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I was invited to speak on this panel, having been reassured that it would be devoted to academic boycotts, in general, but I cannot say that I was surprised to discover that half of the titles here advocate one and only one boycott target. I will therefore make some remarks concerning academic boycotts in general, to which I object on principle, but also comment on the campaign against Israeli universities in particular. I expect that we will hear boycott proponents denounce the apartheid character of Israeli society or policies of genocide and other such mythologies that the boycott movement has disseminated and which the APA may eventually be asked to endorse. But let's leave the propaganda for the discussion section.

I am not an APA member; I did however serve as 2011 president of the Modern Language Association where I have been engaged on the boycott question. I am concerned that the adoption of extremist political positions by scholarly associations only tarnishes the reputation of the associations, and

by extension, the humanities more broadly, while having negligible impact on the political problems they purport to address. You should know in any case that the MLA has not adopted any resolution supporting the anti-Israel boycott; on the contrary, in 2001 the membership ratified a resolution condemning boycotts of scholars. More recently, the American Historical Association rejected a proposal to endorse the anti-Israel boycott in January, 2016, due largely to the perception that the claims made by boycott proponents do not meet the evidentiary standards that professional historians bring to bear to understand complex situations. It does not behoove a scholarly organization to reduce genuine complexities to simplistic misrepresentations. To date, only very small and marginal associations have adopted the boycott.

Obviously if a boycott resolution were to come forward in the APA, it would be up to APA members to evaluate it on its merits, but they would also be deciding whether they intend to cast their lot with the prestigious American Historical Association, with its anti-boycott stance, or the marginal American Studies Association, which, under dubious procedural circumstances, voted to support the boycott and has paid a high reputational price.

What is primarily at stake this afternoon is not a debate over the policies of the Israeli government—in which case the panel should include a very different set of scholars, bona fide policy experts and the like—but rather the appropriateness of academic boycotts in general and the character of the boycott campaign against Israel in particular.

As a citizen, I can engage in various forms of political action to express my opinions and pursue my goals. If I oppose Israel, or specific Israeli policies, I have every right to urge my congressional representatives to vote against foreign aid, just as I may personally refrain from purchasing Israeli products: all my own choice. Should I also consider expressing my opposition to Israel by refraining from reading or citing scholarly works by Israeli scholars?

That is surely one very likely implication of a specifically academic boycott, if the term means anything at all. Yet if those publications were to turn out to be substantive and important, in other words, if it is possible that a philosopher at an Israeli university might produce scholarship of professional significance, then my observing a boycott of Israeli publications would stand at odds with my professional responsibility to remain an active participant in the scholarly discussion. If an academic boycott means

anything, it means refusing to engage with potential colleagues and their ideas solely on the basis of the country in which their universities are located. Participation in an academic boycott is therefore incompatible with professional scholarly responsibility.

Yet the issue is not only whether individual scholars, as a matter of personal choice, engage in boycott activities but rather whether professional associations should adopt a policy of boycotting Israeli academic institutions. What are the implications of adopting such a policy in theory and in practice?

At the outset, one has to concede that boycott adoption is self-evidently inconsistent with the mission of most professional associations of scholars. It is certainly inconsistent with the mission of the APA in particular, which is stated as:

“The American Philosophical Association promotes the discipline and profession of philosophy, both within the academy and in the public arena. The APA supports the professional development of philosophers at all levels

and works to foster greater understanding and appreciation of the value of philosophical inquiry.”

Your mission statement nowhere suggests the propriety of boycotts. On the contrary, membership in the APA is predicated on the assumption of the validity of this announced mission, which involves the promotion of philosophy as discipline and profession, not wide-ranging political advocacy or the prohibition on scholarly engagement required by a boycott.

Participation in an academic boycott would therefore be inconsistent with this mission, and if the APA were to institutionalize a boycott, it would be effectively engaging in a breach of contract with its members (one likely effect of which would be the departure of some members, in the wake of the association’s endorsing a one-sided position in a complex political debate).

The second sentence of the APA mission deserves repeated attention: “The APA supports the professional development of philosophers at all levels and works to foster greater understanding and appreciation of the value of philosophical inquiry.” An academic boycott is inconsistent with these promises. If a boycott has any meaning at all, it would stand in the way of some professional development, and it would in no way “foster greater

understanding...of philosophical inquiry.” Members who had joined the association on the assumption that the mission of the APA is to promote philosophical inquiry would be surprised to find the APA committing itself—and surely some association resources—toward a political advocacy that does not promote philosophical inquiry, and moreover an advocacy with which presumably some members disagree.

Now I expect to hear boycott proponents argue the opposite, i.e. that political action against Israel is actually consistent with the APA mission to promote the discipline and the profession of philosophy. I disagree with that assertion, but let us consider the implications of the claim. If anti-Israel activism is not merely a distinct political position, external to academic philosophy but in fact “promotes the discipline and profession of philosophy,” as defined by the mission statement, then it follows that such activism should not only be pursued by the APA but it should therefore also become a recognized criterion for other pertinent academic processes, in particular hiring, promotion and curriculum design. In other words by defining political activism, especially anti-Israel activism, as consistent with the APA mission of pursuing professional philosophy, the APA would legitimate political activism as consistent as well with the mission of

individual departments of Philosophy. It would then follow that anti-Israel activism should become a litmus test for departmental appointments and promotions; indeed such a redefined understanding of professionalism in your discipline would imply the expectation that you include on your c.v. a clear indication of your judgment on the Arab-Israeli conflict. However at that point at the latest, you will have replaced professional responsibility to the discipline with idiosyncratic political allegiances to particular values. Are you really prepared to hire the weaker candidate because they have the preferred political loyalties? And why is that not a de facto loyalty oath, a McCarthyism of the left? Boycotting will turn into blacklisting very quickly. To discount this dystopic outcome, the burden of argument is on the boycott proponents to explain why politicizing the APA will not politicize departments: unless of course their agenda is in fact to politicize the departments and to subject all philosophy hires to political criteria, in which case they should defend that position candidly.

In addition to this politicization of the field, a related but separate problem is the concern that an academic boycott would institutionalize impediments to the exchange of ideas, whether by prohibiting interaction with scholars from Israeli institutions or by disallowing cooperation with those institutions, e.g.

by banning subscriptions and other sales of APA publications to Israeli university libraries, refusing to review publications of Israeli scholars, or banning Israeli sources from the footnotes to your articles or from scholarly bibliographies. Such results are the logical consequences of a boycott worth its name. That such activities would however be inconsistent with APA's scholarly mission to promote the discipline is self-evident. That it would be detrimental to the pursuit of knowledge is equally clear and would therefore represent an infringement on the spirit of academic freedom. It is not in the purview of the APA to dictate to its members that they may not engage in academic exchange with a cohort of scholars defined by national origin, or frankly, with any cohort of scholars. But that is exactly what boycott adoption means.

Such are the logical implications of boycott adoption: legitimizing the *Gleichschaltung*, the thorough politicization of your discipline and impeding the free exchange of ideas. However, in debates over the boycott elsewhere (I draw especially on the MLA discussions) one typically encounters mendacity on the part of boycott proponents who claim that boycott adoption would have minimal or even no impact on scholarship and would not harm any individual scholar.

This minimalization of the boycott consequences reflects a recognizable rhetorical strategy. Boycott proponents aspire to the public relations coup of being able to make the seemingly radical claim that a scholarly association is engaged in a boycott of Israel, while however having previously reassured less radical colleagues, the members of the association, that the boycott would obligate them to nothing in order to win their votes. This discrepancy between an internal rhetoric of moderation and an external language of radicalism is nothing else than a mechanism of political manipulation. The boycott movement does not aim at forwarding the mission of the association: it intends to instrumentalize the association for its own political purposes that have nothing to do with the association goals.

Yet the incompatibility of the radical goal and the real conditions of a professional association can also expose the genuine opportunism of the boycott movement. For example, once the American Studies Association adopted its boycott, it faced a situation in which its convention hotels were threatened with a lawsuit concerning potential discrimination on the basis of national origin—if Israeli scholars were not allowed to attend. The result: the ASA quickly retreated and defined its boycott downward, with its

leadership frantically asserting that no Israeli, not even Benjamin Netanyahu, would be prohibited from attending the conference. At that point at the latest, the ASA's grand political gesture made it look ridiculous—a boycott with no teeth—only amplifying the reputational damage it had incurred by adopting the boycott in the first place: you may recall that some two hundred university presidents denounced the boycott adoption.

The suggestion that a scholarly association can adopt a boycott without obligating itself to take any real step, a Potemkin boycott so to speak, only leads to hypocrisy and public embarrassment, but if the boycott does have obligatory consequences, they turn out to be incompatible with the goals of scholarship, let alone the legal conditions, i.e. anti-discrimination statutes, under which professional associations operate.

Are we left then with a boycott that excludes no one? In what sense then is it a boycott? One answer from the boycott proponents is the difficult distinction that they are only pursuing an institutional boycott, not a boycott of individuals. For Judith Butler, a prominent boycott advocate, this means that individual Israelis are welcome to attend conferences, but they should not be allowed to use departmental funds to pay their way—they should seek

other support or, ultimately, use their own personal funds instead.¹ It is unclear exactly how Butler intends to monitor reimbursement processes in order to maintain her boycott agenda. Indeed, under scrutiny the distinction between institutional and individual boycotts becomes untenable. For all of us as scholars, our accomplishments result significantly from our institutional affiliations—our teachers, our students, our libraries, our desks and computers. The notion that one can boycott institutions and not harm individuals is impossible to maintain.

The additional suggestion, by some boycott supporters, that one can conduct boycotts and not harm academic freedom is equally problematic. As I have argued, a boycott will impede the free exchange of ideas and is therefore incompatible with value-free scholarship and professional responsibility. On this point, boycott supporter Omar Barghouti is unique in his honesty when he states candidly that political responsibility “supersedes other considerations about whether such acts of resistance may directly or indirectly injure academic freedom.”² At least there is no pretense here that academic freedom will not be hurt; on the contrary, Barghouti concedes that

¹ Judith Butler, “Academic Freedom and the ASA’s Boycott of Israel: A Response of Michelle Goldberg,” *The Nation*, December 8, 2013, pp. 5-6

² Omar Barghouti, “Critics of the AAUP Report,” <https://www.aaup.org/file/Papers-From-A-Planned-Conference-on-Boycotts.pdf>, p. 46

the boycott may very well impinge on academic freedom, but he mounts an ends-justify-the-means argument, based on the assumption of an indisputable priority of political commitment as the grounds for allowing or disallowing forms of academic exchange. He clearly relegates academic freedom to a secondary status. As a private individual and activist he is free to do so. It would be a quite different matter, however, to see a major scholarly association, like the APA, voluntarily diminish the value of academic freedom. That would be a dangerous outcome indeed.

The extent to which the boycott movement threatens to have repressive consequences on American campuses—where academic freedom is already under pressure from other sources—becomes particularly clear if one looks at the official guide to the boycott movement, the documents of the Palestinian Campaign for the Academic and Cultural Boycott of Israel (PACBI). No matter how proponents may try to sugarcoat the academic genteelness of the boycott in the context of discussions within professional associations—that is the rhetorical minimalization of which I just spoke—the PACBI documentation lets the cat out of the bag, demonstrating beyond any doubt the genuine radicalness and extremism of the boycott program. At stake is much more than some merely symbolic and ultimately

inconsequential refusal to cooperate with Israeli institutions. PACBI goes much further in its implications for the conduct of scholarship in the US. If the APA were to adopt the boycott as defined by PACBI, it would prohibit you from, for example, serving as an external reviewer on dissertations, including those by Palestinian students at Israeli universities. PACBI also endorses what it calls “common sense boycotts,” to protest and disrupt campus addresses by proponents of political positions with which it disagrees. Frankly you would not be allowed to invite me to speak at this panel. Free speech is already endangered on US campuses, a sorry development to which the APA should not lend its prestige.

PACBI furthermore explicitly forbids the organization of events designed to stage dialogues between Israelis and Palestinians. Precisely the sort of exchange of ideas that might yield new insights in the conflict is not allowed. These are denounced as “normalization projects.”³ So should the APA eventually face an opportunity to vote on a boycott, by all means understand that doing so is explicitly defined as a vote against dialogue. You would then have to explain how proscription of dialogue promotes “the

³ PACBI Guidelines for the International Academic Boycott of Israel (Revised July 2014), <http://www.pacbi.org/etemplate.php?id=1108>

discipline and profession of philosophy,” which is, again, how the APA describes its own mission.

Still, some may argue, like Barghouti, that sacrificing academic freedom, suppressing speech, and prohibiting dialogue and the exchange of ideas are prices one should be prepared to pay in order to achieve some desirable political end. It is however by no means clear that the consequences of an academic boycott (as opposed to other forms of political action) will in fact lead to positive developments in the Middle East. My claim, to the contrary, is that the consequences will be primarily in US academic culture, with deleterious results. Moreover it seems at most dubious that prohibiting the exchange of ideas on American campuses will accelerate peace between Israelis and Palestinians.

The example of South Africa, often invoked as the precedent for an academic boycott of Israel in order to make the consequentialist case like Barghouti, is actually quite ambiguous and may in fact prove the opposite. Writing in the journal of the AAUP, Jonathan Hyslop of the University of Witwatersrand argues that “the South African academic boycott [as opposed to the divestment campaign—RB] was riddled with conflicts among its

supporters, inconsistencies, and minor injustices. It was plagued by the problem of unintended consequences. In my view it had no important political effect in undermining apartheid and...may have had a minor negative impact on postapartheid society.”⁴ The boycott meant that anti-apartheid activist scholars from South Africa faced boycotts when they spoke in England, and it undermined the capacity of apartheid opponents abroad to interact with resistance forces within the universities. Hyslop continues, “Compared with economic, sports, and cultural boycotts, the academic boycott was feeble indeed. I can honestly say that, throughout the 1980s, I did not talk to a single South African scholar or university employee whose political views had been changed in any way by the academic boycott. Whereas the economic boycott had some palpable effect on the regime, and sports and cultural boycotts had irritant effects on white society, the academic boycott had little in the way of visible achievements.”⁵ If anything, he suggests, it was the failure of the cultural boycott that introduced new ideas into South Africa. Ultimately however political change resulted from the force of the local mass movement, not the imaginations of humanities professors in North America.

⁴ “The South African Boycott Experience,” <https://www.aaup.org/file/Papers-From-A-Planned-Conference-on-Boycotts.pdf>, p. 59

⁵ p. 61

The same considerations hold for the Middle East: a decision to boycott Israeli academics is more likely to undermine progressive forces in the region than to strengthen them. I contend that that is in fact the intention: the goal of the academic boycott and BDS is precisely to weaken the liberal forces of progress that are clustered in the universities. What the boycott wants to prevent, at all costs, is a compromise solution—like the outcomes in Northern Ireland or in the Balkans—which could provide for pragmatic mechanisms and reasonable conflict resolution. That is what the boycott movement does not want to see come to pass. The goal of undermining the liberal camp is therefore a partial explanation for the targeting of universities.

But it is only a partial explanation. It is curious after all that it is exclusively an academic boycott that is at stake. Why not target the economy or the technology? Why not mobilize against US aid for the Israeli military? While such alternative strategies might make rational sense to an opponent of Israel, the boycott movement has chosen to focus on the most liberal sectors of Israeli society, not only for the political reason suggested a moment ago but also, evidently, because attacking universities reflects the fundamental

anti-intellectualism that characterizes contemporary radicalism in the American academic landscape. Somehow it is contact with intellectuals that is a particular anathema to boycott proponents: they would censure me for delivering a lecture at an Israeli university but not for speaking to the Israeli Defense Forces. In other words, Israel is less the target than universities as such.

How exactly will less philosophy make the Middle East better? This is the question implied by Hyslop's trenchant reflection on the South Africa experience: "If we do believe that scholarship is more than a job, that ideas do make a difference in human affairs, that the clash of ideas is essential to change, then it is difficult for me to understand how stemming the flow of people and ideas assists us toward a better world."⁶ Difficult indeed, unless one recognizes that what underpins the boycott movement as an expression of contemporary radicalism is not only an interest in the Middle East but also an antagonism toward ideas and thought. The strategy of constraining academic speech with regard to Israel/Palestine is ultimately indistinguishable from the proliferation of speech codes on campuses, the retraction of invitations to controversial speakers, and the troubling

⁶ p. 64

development of a university culture where critical thought is subject to trigger warnings. That is why the boycott is part of much larger problems in the contemporary academy to which the APA should not contribute

Campus debates over Israel have represented the Middle East as a histrionic morality play, with no room for ambiguities or nuance, let alone compromise: on the one hand, infinitely culpable oppressors, on the other absolutely innocent victims. The polemical debates display less and less genuine political and intellectual content: all the more reason for the APA to stand off. And what of the genocide allegations against Israel? It is a strange genocide indeed that produces heightened life expectancy, declining infant mortality and a growing population. And apartheid? Israeli universities and much of its society are more integrated than most of US higher education. That is an arena in which scholarly associations could act politically: pursuing diversity in our own departments and addressing the scandalous treatment of non-tenure track faculty. Yet too often, tenured professors prefer the anti-imperialist gesture of denouncing injustices abroad in order to avoid addressing the injustices in their own institutions, injustices from which they themselves benefit. That's a political arena we should explore.

But regarding Israel/Palestine, APA members should ask what particular professional expertise they really bring to the table, and why they are better equipped to solve the problem than was Secretary Kerry in his extensive efforts. What we do know is that the conflict is of long standing, with fault on both sides. The boycott movement, instead, provides a caricatured one-sided account, where all the responsibility lies with the Israelis—a judgment which, perhaps unintentionally, infantilizes the Palestinians as exclusively victims with no agency of their own. Or perhaps that infantilization is not unintentional but reflects the moralizing stance of American university professors happy to tell the whole world the right way to live. Meanwhile, although the boycott focuses exclusively on Israel, the larger context of the Middle East is peremptorily declared to be irrelevant: since Syria isn't about Jews, it's just not of interest to the radical camp. On that point, I note that former Archbishop of Canterbury and current Master of Magdalene College in Cambridge, Rowan Williams, has denounced the rise of “poisonous” anti-semitism in universities, a development that certainly intersects with mobilized anti-Zionism.⁷ The boycott movement, with its obsession with Israel, consistently displays a claustrophobically narrow tunnel vision,

⁷ “Rowan Williams ‘slams growing university anti-semitism,’” *Premier* March 13, 2016 <https://www.premier.org.uk/News/UK/Rowan-Williams-slams-growing-university-anti-semitism>

Accessed March 27, 2016

unable to look at the wider conflagration. Philosophers should have broader horizons.

And different philosophers may come to different conclusions about a complex political topic. The strength of the APA, the professional association of philosophers, rests on its capacity to maintain an institutional neutrality and to provide fora in which a range of issues can be debated among professionals in the pursuit of knowledge. Should it instead decide to mandate political opinion by imposing temporarily majority views on the minority, it will only stifle dissent, cause some members to depart, endorse repressive practices throughout the profession, and impoverish its own capacity to pursue its announced responsibility of “foster[ing] greater understanding and appreciation of the value of philosophical inquiry.”

