

Joanna Williams, **The Ignorance of the Boycott Brigade**

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BDS-supporting academics violate the very principles of freedom and universality upon which the university is built.

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On 16 December 2013, a pre-eminent academic disciplinary body, the American Studies Association (ASA), used the occasion of its annual conference to push through a boycott of Israeli universities. This unprecedented attack on academic freedom came on the back of campaigns organised by the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions (BDS) movement, which, in its most recent incarnation, began in Britain in 2005 and rapidly migrated to the US. Cary Nelson, former president of the American Association of University Professors (AAUP), describes the BDS campaign as ‘the most influential current version of a long-term effort to delegitimize the state of Israel’.

The Case Against Academic Boycotts of Israel, a collection of essays edited by Nelson and Gabriel Noah Brahm, aims to provide an immediate and badly needed response to the ASA boycott. This impressive volume successfully counters every

argument made by BDS proponents as well as providing extensive context to debates around both academic freedom and the state of Israel. Nelson draws upon his knowledge of the AAUP, an organisation founded in 1915 with a key objective of enshrining the importance of academic freedom in higher education. The historical comparisons highlight the parlous state of academia today, and help explain why the BDS movement has gained such traction in universities. The contributors to this volume rescue the concept of academic freedom, and through it the idea of scholarship itself, from the sneering contempt of the boycotters and their attempts to redefine academic freedom beyond all recognition.

The book contains numerous examples to illustrate the deleterious effect boycotts have upon academic freedom. We're told of authors who refuse to have their books translated into Hebrew, Israeli academics pulled from the editorial boards of journals, PhD students prevented from taking up scholarships, as well as many more mundane examples of academics not being able to speak at conferences or take part in collaborative research projects. Steven Salaita, a leading BDS advocate who is now more famous for recently having his tenured position at the University of Illinois rescinded, is quoted as saying he is 'tepid

about academic freedom as a right'. This was before he accepted money from the AAUP to help him fight his own case on the grounds of academic freedom. Perhaps more scurrilous are the Orwellian attempts of the likes of Sunaina Maira, editor of *The Imperial University*, to promote the boycott on the grounds that it 'enlarges academic freedom for all'. Presumably, this is all except Israeli academics.

In his contribution, David Hirsh argues that the ASA's boycott is built on a notion of 'the collective guilt of Israeli intellectuals'. He provides a thorough analysis of the 'myth' of the institutional boycott, exploring how, in reality, it is a wholesale attack upon individual academic freedom. Russell Berman notes the inherent dishonesty of the BDS proponents' suggestion that individual Israelis can exempt themselves from the boycott if they use private finance for international conference attendance and denounce the policies of their government towards Palestinians. He notes the irony of a boycott being 'premised on that strangely neoliberal illusion that one can strip away [institutional] infrastructure without harming the individual scholar at all'.

The AAUP reminds academics that universities should be 'institutions committed to the search for truth and its free expression'. At the heart of the BDS

movement lies the opposite belief – that academic freedom should be conditional on the identity or political views of the individual scholar. Presumably this requires a morally attuned elite to sit in judgement on their colleagues and decide whether denunciations of Israel are expressed with sufficient veracity. We are reminded that the AAUP ‘cannot endorse the use of political or religious views as a test of eligibility for participation in the academic community’. This point is reinforced by Martha Nussbaum: ‘For a group to say that journals and academic conferences have a litmus test, namely a particular position on the actions of the government of Israel, is infinitely more threatening than if it simply boycotted all Israeli scholars alike.’

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