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Biblio File: Bullies, Dissemblers and Slanderers

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The Case Against Academic Boycotts of Israel

Cary Nelson and Gabriel Noah Brahm, Wayne State University Press, 2015.

Boycotting Israel Is Wrong: The Progressive Path to Peace Between Palestinians and Israelis

Philip Mendes and Nick Dyrenfurth, New South Publishing, 2015.

At my very first class as a student of Sydney University's Government Department, my tutor accused Israel of specific unethical, potentially brutal, activity. When I asked for more background, I was given a project - research the subject and present my findings at the next scheduled tutorial.

An enthusiastic 18-year-old, I went to the university library and quickly discovered that my tutor was in error. Armed with a sheath of photocopies of source material, I came to the lesson to find him armed with a clipping from the newspaper which eventually became *Green Left Weekly*.

The reward for my curiosity was to find myself the victim of a vindictive authority figure and a perspective on the way anti-Israel leftists and academics treat facts, evidence and non-conformity.

Even before I commenced university, I had some engagement with far-left political grouplets, who sought to influence public policy through subterfuge, with unbridled cynicism and contempt for anyone who did not share every aspect of their world view.

Although most of these grouplets wouldn't generally acknowledge it, the mother-lode that they tapped for much of their anti-Israel propaganda was the Soviet Union's notorious anti-Zionist outlets, moulded to suit the tunnel vision of anti-colonialism, anti-capitalism, anti-liberalism, anti-social democracy and even unreconstructed antisemitism.

There were then, as now, variations on the theme of anti-Zionism, but the bottom line - no Israel - was the same.

Fast forward to 2015, where the most vocal of those in the forefront of anti-Israel activity brand themselves as supporters of boycotts of, divestment from, and sanctions on, Israel (BDS)

While there may well be some individuals misled into believing peace, justice or some other worthy aspiration is served through joining the anti-Israel bully chorus, it is not difficult to show how this is, to say the least, delusory.

It has been my unfortunate experience to have engaged for some time with Australia's advocates of anti-Israel measures, and I can report the following:

- Even prominent anti-Israel campaigners admit, when challenged, they don't know very much about Israel, the Palestinians, history or current events. What they do know is who they cheer for, having first determined that it is a simple, two-sided contest.
- Being truthful, in terms of evidence, is far less important to them than being true believers.
- Palestinians' welfare is far less important than feeling they are punishing Israel for its perceived sins.
- Local political considerations dramatically outweigh any consequences of actions on the future of Palestinians (let alone Israelis).
- To be identified as hypocrites, for example, when they use Israeli technology while urging others to reject it, or as amoral, for expending efforts and energies on attacking Israel and showing no concern for the most egregious abusers, doesn't bother them one iota.

This doesn't mean there aren't people who think that they are acting ethically, even heroically, in adopting some or all of the planks of the "BDS" platform.

The excuse that they simply are unaware of counter-arguments, though this reflects intellectual laziness and abrogation of moral responsibility, may well be genuine.

Two recently published books, however, mean that such alibis will hold far less water in the future.

The collection of essays edited by Cary Nelson and Gabriel Noah Brahm presents, as the title makes clear, *The Case Against Academic Boycotts of Israel* (from an overwhelmingly North American perspective).

The second, by Australian authors Nick Dyrenfurth and Philip Mendes, *Boycotting Israel is Wrong* is directed unambiguously at inhabitants of the cultural and political world of self-described leftists and progressives.

Both books are necessary, timely and valuable resources.

The Nelson/Brahm volume was put together in response to a series of anti-Israel resolutions at a variety of US-based organisations of academics, with the recognition that

there was no simple resource available to those seeking to know the arguments against this devil's choir.

The 32 essays are of variable utility, with some aiming at narrow targets or addressing issues with quite specific time frames. But the good essays are very good, and the book, as an integrated volume, conveys some powerful messages.

Robert Fine's passionate deconstruction of arguments that frame "Zionism as a dirty word"; Donna Robinson Divine's explication of the harm done to the academy by the intellectual thugs who lead boycott campaigns; Russell Berman on the "infringement of academic culture" by opponents of free enquiry; and Cary Nelson's dissection, and destruction, of the ludicrous pseudo-intellectualism of one of the movement's icons, are amongst the stand-outs.

A thinking reader will encounter intellectual stimulation and inspiration while navigating the internal debates on the relationship between anti-Zionism and antisemitism, different perspectives of Israeli history and politics, the power complexes in academic environments and whether "progressives" are mostly the problem, the solution, or a mixture of both.

The essays devoted to the reality of life for Israelis and Palestinians show a shared compassion for all the human beings who are enmeshed in a complex reality, and try to put forward visions of futures that offer security, justice and opportunity for all to hold, and fulfill, individual and communal aspirations.

The most contentious section of the book groups essays devoted to the subject of "The BDS Movement, the Left and American Culture". Those on the left will find their world views assaulted vigorously by conservative contributors, those on the right will encounter essays which seem to have a generosity of spirit towards progressives which they will find unjustifiable. It is to the editors' credit that they put some of the diversity of opponents of BDS on display.

My friend Kenneth Stern's summary of the book, with which I wholeheartedly agree, is that "the essays as a whole are essential reading, for those who want to understand, in detail, why an academic boycott of Israel is discrimination, pure and simple, and why it threatens not only Israeli academics, and not just Jewish academics in addition, but the academy itself."

The majority of contributors to Nelson/Brahm are on the progressive side of the political divide, but their intended audience is all those engaged, actively or intellectually, in the debate on BDS. By contrast, Mendes and Dyrenfurth address, clearly and unequivocally, self-identifying leftists.

For those who are not part of this sub-culture, the concerns may seem esoteric and the jargon may come as a challenge, but for its intended audience it is not just appropriate but pitched with perfection.

The writing is passionate and somewhat polemical, but the writers justify this through their analysis of the problems and their commitment to the solution they proffer.

Where they are at their most effective is in their dismantling of the self-righteous rhetoric, often phrased to appear to reflect moral superiority, of people who are bigots, cranks and logically shabby.

Although I disagree with aspects of their analysis of the history of the anti-Israel boycott movement and some of their assessments of personalities and events in Australia, the more important part of the book is its conclusions, which are directed at ideas and ideologies, and which are well argued and justified throughout the text.

Whether one considers BDS in theory to be antisemitic or not, it attracts antisemites and those who are not racist need to ask themselves why this is so. In practice, anti-Jewish slanders have featured in BDS activism, as has callous disregard for the aspirations of non-Jewish Israelis, Palestinians and others.

Some BDS proponents proffer a theory that it somehow contributes to a peace process, and the authors do a good job of exposing this fantasy for what it is. Similarly, the book contains good documentation of the anti-Israeli fundamentalism which results in institutions such as Sydney University's Centre for Peace and Conflict Studies opposing visits by even far-left Jewish Israelis.

While Nelson and Brahm address a number of variations on the theme of BDS, Mendes and Dyrenfurth concentrate on the maximalist version most commonly encountered in the ideological leftists' sub-culture. Its strength and value is in the ammunition it provides for those in the left who are engaged in battles against the malice and ignorance which drive anti-Israel fanaticism.

Just as these two books have contributed to the filling of a real deficit in resources, they also expose the need for more works to be produced on anti-Israel activism.

In Australia, as well as in many other countries, one of the leading arenas for anti-Israel activism is the Church. With the least moral of the dissemblers appealing to people of good will, presenting injustice in the guise of justice and exploiting bigotry while falsely professing concern with human dignity, Christians have been misled into moral valleys of darkness and unknowingly acted in ways which go against every value they would otherwise articulate.

I would hope that basic intellectual integrity and genuine morality would prevent this situation, but I am sure a volume directed specifically at this audience would greatly assist the process.

Meanwhile, I commend the published books to anyone with a genuine concern for a peaceful, just future for Israel and the Palestinians.