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The Case Against Academic Boycotts of Israel

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Cary Nelson and Gabriel Brahm, in less than a year, were able to assemble, edit, index, and bring to press a 500-plus page thoughtful volume of essays, outlining many of the problems with boycotting (some would say blacklisting) Israeli academic institutions (and, as the book convincingly argues, the academics who make up those institutions, Jewish and Arab alike).

The impetuses for the book were the votes in late 2013 by the American Studies Association (and some other small academic groups) to boycott Israeli academic institutions, and the anti-Israel resolution and one-sided pro-boycott panel discussion at the January 2014 meeting of the Modern Language Association. While a growing body of literature endorses an academic boycott (or Boycott/Divestment/Sanctions more broadly), there was no single volume outlining the case against an academic boycott, and Nelson and Brahm were determined to produce one.

Like any volume of essays, some are more valuable than others, but there are exceptional ones here. Stand-out essays include one by Russell Berman, who makes a compelling case that there is no such thing as an “institutional” boycott, because of the ways an individual academic “necessarily depends on the institution;” and by Sharon Ann Musher, who retells the troubling story of the American Studies Association’s endorsement of an academic boycott in powerful detail, showing how at each step pro-boycott proponents

within the ASA chose to limit discussion and derail communications from those opposed to the resolution.

Musher also includes a great quote not adequately reported at the time, demonstrating the rank absurdity of an academic boycott as a means that is supposed to motivate Israel politicians to become more progressive – Catholic University President John Garvey’s description of the ASA vote as “a kind of inept volunteer fire department, aiming to put out the Israeli-Palestinian conflagration by throwing gasoline on the fire. That’s not exactly right. It has decided to pour gas not on the source of the fire, but on bystanders, some of whom are trying to extinguish the flames.” Likewise, in the valuable supporting material at the end of the book, Sari Nusseibeh, then (2006) president of Al Quds University, correctly noted, “If we are to look at Israeli society, it is within the academic community that we’ve had the most progressive pro-peace views and views that have come out in favor of seeing us as equals. If you want to punish any sector, this is the last one to approach.”

The most important essay is Cary Nelson’s thoughtful examination of Judith Butler, and the pro-academic boycott movement for which she is both a leading advocate and guiding intellectual. Nelson deconstructs what he terms Butler’s “idealist fantasy of historical possibility,” in which she presumes that Jewish Israelis would gladly abandon their capacity for national self-expression, and willingly see Israel disappear, in order to effectuate Butler’s view of what a political solution to the conflict might look like (in effect, Jewish sovereignty relinquished, and a majority Arab population in a single state, where the common frame of identity would be shared senses of diaspora). Nelson effectively demonstrates that this is not only magical thinking, but also a formula for perpetual violence (since neither side will abandon its desires for national self-expression without a fight).

As other essays make clear, the point of the exercise of the academic boycott is not necessarily to “win,” or as some of its supporters believe, a vehicle to get Israel to pull out of the West Bank, but rather to reinforce the narrative that Israel is a deformed, illegitimate society that has no right to be treated by the same standards as other nation states (sort of like how classic antisemitism views Jews).

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Ilan Troen’s essays, toward the end of the volume, underscore two important points: 1) that the conflict is wrongly cast by pro-boycotters as a simple one of European colonizers and their victims, rather than as a complex conflict between two peoples, both of whom have indigenous ties to the land and 2) the deep involvement of Palestinian Arabs within the Israeli higher education system, and the damage that would be done to them, and to efforts to increase empathy across the political divide, if an academic boycott were to succeed.

Other important contributions are David Hirsh’s review of the academic boycott efforts in the United Kingdom, and Paul Berman’s thoughtful preface.

The volume is also intriguing because, while politics divide pro- and anti-boycott activists, there are also significant political divisions in the anti-boycott camp, ones that are not directly addressed, but make the volume richer for this diversity.

Many of the essays dance around the question of whether BDS in general, or the proposal of a blacklist of Israeli academics is antisemitic. Whether the “antisemitism” tag fits, in whole or part, is not a necessary question to answer -- academic boycotts are anathema to the educational process regardless. But many essays demonstrate that the principles behind the boycott (such as the PACBI call for boycott based, in part, on objection to Israel’s “Zionist ideology”) are intended by the movement’s leaders as opposition to the Jewish national project, presented as a principled anti-racist stance by those who either see themselves as victims of racism, or as allies to such victims. Alan Johnson, in his contribution, calls this “vindictive one-statism [which] seeks to end Israel by rewinding the film of history and undoing 1948.” Nelson posits, “any solution that involves dismantling the Jewish state is antisemitic in effect and fueled at least obliquely, as Butler seems not to understand, by antisemitic traditions.”

Some of the essays – by anti-boycott activists who have shown little respect for notions of academic freedom – are somewhat troubling. Tammi Rossman-Benjamin, who provides a useful analysis of the disciplines from which most pro-academic boycotters come, is otherwise clearing her throat for advancing a blacklist of those who support the boycott – which she did shortly before the book was released, and for which she was sharply criticized by leading Jewish studies scholars. If teachers are treating students unfairly, they should be criticized for what they do. Presumptions of how a professor acts or may act toward Jewish or pro-Israel students because of his or her political beliefs have no more place in the academy than presumptions, thankfully not so often heard these days, that homosexuals should not be afforded the same opportunities to teach because of fear they might be pedophiles (or, for a more exact parallel, that professors who are fervently pro-Israel might not be fair to a student of Palestinian origin). There is a fundamental distinction – clear to some authors, but not others – between overt discrimination (such as a blacklist of scholars who happen to be women, or Muslim, or Black, or Jewish, or Israeli), and the discussion of ideas, which include not only the articulation of reasons one might be supportive of a boycott, but also engaging in activity to advance those ideas.

Rossmann-Benjamin also in effect diminishes academic freedom, by setting up the straw man that it is a “vague” and “malleabl[e] construct,” and then arguing against teaching, political speech, or political action she doesn’t like as items that ought, in her view, to result in legal threats against universities and faculty members.

Ken Marcus, the most serious and consistent of the conservative and right-wing actors who have essays in this volume, provides a detailed and nuanced look at the question of antisemitism in the BDS movement. He is commendably cautious in his language as he isolates four grounds on which to consider this question (which he terms “Intentionality, Tacitness, Memetics, and Jewish Trait”). Yet, troublingly, he sees the antisemitism

question as central, and criticizes those who focus “instead on lower-stake arguments against BDS, such as its hypocrisy, false claims, or violations of academic freedom...if BDS is anti-Semitic, then its damage to academic freedom would be, at least by the standards of value, a matter of secondary importance.”

For Marcus and Rossman-Benjamin and some of the other authors, campus speech which they claim is antisemitic should apparently be beyond the pale. But it would be unfair and unwise to label advocacy of a boycott of Israel as per se antisemitic, and even if it were, it would nonetheless be protected political speech. Campus debates permit speech which some consider sexist (questions about the alleged different abilities of genders to do different things), racist (incantations to the Bell Curve), Islamophobic (questions about the role of Islam in contemporary terrorism), and other difficult and perhaps bigoted inquiries. The answer is not to suppress such speech, but to counter it and to demonstrate, by evidence and argument, the bigotry involved.

Coupled with the troubling notions of suppression and censorship, rather than exposure and censure, are some suggestions – Ms. Rossman-Benjamin’s again in particular – that incantations to “social justice” are in part to blame. She writes that certain “areas of study . . . such as the civil rights movement, feminism, anti-imperialism, and Marxism, which were established to pursue ‘social justice’ for the oppressed by combating the ‘evils’ of the racist, sexist, colonialist, capitalist oppressor . . . makes for the blurring of the lines between scholarship and activism.” There is, of course, a germ of truth in what Rossman-Benjamin writes: some academics are so driven by their politics that they apply and model different standards of critical analysis to ideas with which they agree, than to those which challenge their world view. It is one thing to observe that activists who believe they have justice on their side (as do many pro-Israel proponents too) tend to exhibit zealotry, and that zealotry frequently is a corrosive to critical thinking. It is quite another to suggest that such instincts, whether rooted in fields more concerned with social justice than others or as part of extracurricular interests, are somehow inappropriate for the college campus.

2014 marked the 50th anniversary of the Berkeley Free Speech Movement and Freedom Summer. Those who are old enough remember well the social activism of students in 1968 globally, and the role students have had in supporting movements to defeat South African Apartheid, to protect abortion rights, to oppose exploitive labor practices and corporate pollution. Social action for social justice is not the problem here, nor is the problem that some social action is linked to discussion in the classroom, or that some occurs on the quad or in the street. Students are better prepared to be contributing citizens if they also have a passion to right wrongs. The problem is that too many of the anti-boycott activists (like too many pro-boycott activists) evidently want to suppress rather than expose those with whom they disagree. Likewise, some boycott opponents suffer from the same myopia they accuse boycott supporters of exhibiting, but in reverse (BDS promoters are too often defense lawyers for Palestinians, arguing away the importance of things like antisemitism written in to the Hamas charter, so as to paint Israel as wrong all the time; many anti-BDS activists are too often defense lawyers for Israel, not even

pausing to consider why the condition of the Palestinians might warrant a caring young person to exhibit some sympathy, or that actions of the Israeli government increasing settlement activity have real consequences, not only for the prospects of peace, but also for ordinary Palestinians).

Certainly, there are some students and professors, eager to right wrongs, who come aboard the BDS bandwagon without much thought, or as political fashion – frequently with empathy for only one side, and blinders about bigotry and double-standards. But the answer to this problem is not to bemoan their activism, but to do precisely what this volume is doing: demonstrate, by facts, that the arguments in favor of boycott are not only faulty and dangerous, but at heart discriminatory and not in the least bit progressive (if one is actually seeking a just solution to the conflict).

Yet, despite these shortcomings of some essays from the right, the essays as a whole are essential reading, for those who want to understand, in detail, why an academic boycotts 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. It is essential reading.

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