

Jonathan Marks, **Abstain Loudly:**

A review of *The Case Against Academic Boycotts of Israel*

**reprinted from *Scholars for Peace in the Middle East*
and *The Algemeiner* (November 2014)**

In my favorite essay in the superb *Case Against Academic Boycotts of Israel*, Emily Budick speaks to the failure of many academics caught up in the Boycott, Divestment, Sanctions (BDS) movement to live up to two requirements of “moral thinking and action.” The first is “the requirement that each and every one of us investigate the truth and examine for ourselves what constitutes ‘the good.’” The second is “the necessity of placing oneself, and not only the object of one’s criticism, under suspicion.” Even intellectuals can “capitulate to badges and names.” Many of those who support the BDS movement repeat slogans—“Zionism is racism”; “Israel is an apartheid state”—whose meaning they have never seriously considered. Such intellectuals are not rebelling but conforming to a view of Israel that now dominates certain academic fields and subfields.

One need only consider the case of the Association for Asian American Studies which in April 2013 became the first American academic association explicitly to support BDS. The vote, conducted by secret ballot, was unanimous, without a single abstention. More than a year has passed since, and BDS has been much debated. But to my knowledge not one member of the AAAS—not one!—has publicly questioned, much less condemned, the resolution. This astounding lockstep suggests that Budick is right to think that “self-interrogation, and therefore intellectual honesty” is “lacking in many supporters of BDS against Israel.” Indeed, “there are too many folks simply jumping on the nearest bandwagon without bothering to ask where that bandwagon is headed and what it stands for.”

This malady, to which we intellectuals like to think ourselves immune, was noted long ago by Jean-Jacques Rousseau: “a freethinker or philosopher today would have been nothing but a fanatic at the time of the [Holy] League.” Indeed, Rousseau, the victim of a propaganda campaign managed by “enlightenment” thinkers, well knew that progressive intellectuals could come to resemble their enemies in their eagerness to suppress dissent. With his dramatic withdrawal from the intellectual life of Paris, Rousseau indicated that he thought the malady incurable; intellectuals setting out to

live the life of the mind in the midst of society will inevitably, being as vain and selfish as non-intellectuals, give in to the temptation to sacrifice their integrity, whether to the party in power or to the party that hopes to be in power. From this perspective the idea of the university as a socially sanctioned refuge for inquiry is a fantasy.

I am not sure if Cary Nelson and Gabriel Noah Brahm would own up to it, but the book they have co-edited reads to me not only as a critique of the boycott Israel movement in academia, but also as a hopeful defense of the possibility of scholarship. Scholarship need not eventuate in non-partisanship—most of the essayists in the volume are advocates of a two state solution—but scholars insist that opinion be informed, both by the facts of the matter, insofar as we can ascertain them, and by the strongest arguments to be offered for rival interpretations of those facts. Perhaps above all, scholars as scholars withhold judgment when they are not confident they know what they are talking about. In this spirit, Nelson and Brahm offer not only the essays, but also a history of Israel, and a selection of resources, including pro-BDS resources like the Electronic Intifada and Jewish Voice for Peace, for readers seeking to understand better what all the fuss is about. One of Nelson's own contributions, a patient, charitable, extended analysis of Judith Butler's anti-Zionism, is a model of engaging what one's own opponents hold up as their strongest arguments.

Because I cannot hope to do justice to the 25 essays included in *The Case Against Academic Boycotts of Israel*, I will follow one thread, which leads through most of them, the thread I have already identified, via Budick, as the tension between the BDS movement and self-interrogation. In the first of four sections of the book, the essayists consider the trouble with academic boycotts in general, referencing but not focusing single mindedly on the Israel boycott. Russell Berman, in "Scholars Against Scholarship," argues that academic boycotts introduce a "political litmus test into the scholarly world," demanding that scholars ritually denounce the boycott's object in order to be welcomed into the community. Writing of the American Studies Association's recent decision to boycott Israel, Berman observes that the boycott necessarily entails "restriction on the free flow of ideas." Although the ASA's leaders have denied up and down that they intend this restriction, a cursory reading of the resolution they passed, included in the volume, indicates that those who dare to utter a defense of Israel will have, as far as ASA is concerned, identified themselves as supporters of "racism," "discrimination," and "xenophobia." To demonize Israel and its supporters

in this way is not only to absolve oneself of responsibility for listening to their arguments but also to applaud those who wish to shun Israeli scholars quite beyond the shunning the ASA boycott specifically calls for. The ASA in effect “appeals to its members to do whatever it likes to the demonized enemy.” With the notable exception of Buffy the Vampire Slayer, those who think they are fighting demons are not inclined toward self-criticism.

The second section uses the ASA boycott as a kind of case study. Sharon Musher’s shocking essay in that part, “The Closing of the American Studies Association’s Mind,” underscores the determination of pro-BDS academics to avoid the investigation into the truth that Budick identifies as a requirement of moral thinking and action and that remains the only widely accepted justification for the existence of universities. In the period leading up to the vote on the BDS resolution, the ASA leadership refused to “circulate or post . . . letters or any material that conveyed alternative perspectives,” including one letter signed by eight former presidents of the association. That refusal had nothing to do with a wish on the leadership’s part to remain neutral. Indeed, more than half of the voting members of ASA’s National Council had previously endorsed the boycott, and leaders unapologetically used their power to make sure the resolution passed, in spite of the valiant efforts of Musher and her allies. “All of the ASA’s official correspondence preemptively supported the boycott and included links to works that supported it.” The leadership posted “only pro-boycott news and links” on its homepage.

The atmosphere at the 2013 meeting at which the resolution was discussed was no better. At a “town hall” on Israel and Palestine, presided over by boycott supporters, mild opposition was met with “snaps, hisses, and boos.” One questioner who had the temerity to bring up her experience with anti-Semitism was told by a panelist to “take it to the therapist.” Although Musher portrays the debate over the resolution as a contest that the good guys may have won had they been permitted fully to present their arguments, I suspect the ASA would have voted for the resolution anyway. Indeed, Musher herself says that a number of senior scholars recruited to oppose the resolution had left or never joined the ASA because, their own left or liberal politics notwithstanding, they found the ASA too politicized. For that reason, we cannot necessarily attribute the bullying tactics of the pro-boycott forces to desperation or the closeness of the contest; it is at least equally plausible that their attempts to humiliate and silence the opposition reflect their view—do they convey it to their students?—of how academic discourse

ought to work.

The third and longest section concerns the place of the BDS movement on the left. In a political atmosphere in which Zionism is routinely treated as a right wing phenomenon, it is refreshing to see people like Alan Johnson, a member of the editorial board of *Dissent*, turn the tables on anti-Zionism, a species of what he calls “reactionary anti-imperialism.” Anti-Zionist ideology reduces “the complexity of the post cold-war world to a single great contest—“Imperialism” against “the resistance.”” According to this Manichean view, adopted by “many on the left,” Israel, whatever its virtues, cannot be forgiven for being allied with the West. More strikingly, Islamist movements, whatever their vices, can be embraced by the left so long as they oppose Israel and the West. That is how Judith Butler came to describe the “eliminationist antisemites of Hamas and Hezbollah” as “social movements that are progressive, that are on the Left, that are part of a global Left.” To manage this almost unbelievable feat, Butler and others on her side are compelled resolutely to avoid any recognition that Israel has legitimate security concerns, that it is anything other than a settler state akin in motivation and power to the British Empire, that anyone other than Israel is responsible for ongoing violence in the Middle East, and that there is such a thing as Arab and Palestinian antisemitism that cannot be understood as a reaction to Israeli aggression. Johnson is one of several essayists prepared to risk the charge of right-wingism and Islamophobia to save the left from doing on a large scale what the ASA has done on a small scale, namely embracing an illiberal, perhaps anti-Semitic, doctrine that can thrive only by trading the pursuit of the truth for the repetition of slogans.

One of those slogans, that Israel is an apartheid state, should not survive contact with the fourth section which, as Cary Nelson puts it in the book’s introduction, “challenges readers to consider what they should know about Israel before taking either a pro- or anti-boycott position.” Shira Wolosky’s “Teaching in Transnational Israel” describes Wolosky’s experience teaching in Israel universities, which provide “a rare place and time in which students from different backgrounds are together in a common endeavor, that of learning and earning a degree.” In Wolosky’s feminist theory course at Hebrew University, “women with covered hair and without covered hair, Muslim and Jewish, Christian and many other sorts of transnational Israelis” develop critical perspectives on their communities of origin and discover “the norms of other communities in which other students are members in ways that are both critical and respectful.” Only in a left defined by

the BDS movement, could Wolosky, who is not alone among the essayists in thinking that “Israel must withdraw from the West Bank,” risk being written out of the left and accused of pinkwashing for teaching feminism at Hebrew University, while Judith Butler, who has welcomed Hamas to the global left, remains a leftist and feminist heroine.

Wolosky’s course is just one illustration of the way in which the Manichean view of the BDS movement is out of tune with Israeli reality. Ilan Troen showcases cooperation between Israel and Palestinian universities, and Rachel S. Harris explores an emerging Arab-Israeli literature that refuses both Zionist and Palestinian nationalism in favor of a hybrid identity that takes into account the “complexities of contemporary Israel.” While scholars and teachers typically seek to acknowledge such complexities, supporters of BDS are reduced to discounting them or, still worse, proposing that cooperative projects and attempts to find a third way between Zionism and Arab nationalism are betrayals because they set back the effort to delegitimize Israel.

It is hard to know what impact a book like *The Case Against Academic Boycotts* will have. I said before that scholars as scholars withhold judgment when they are not confident they know what they are talking about. But in the present, heated atmosphere, in which a relatively small number of anti-Zionist students and faculty members are opposed by a still smaller number of students and faculty members, often but not always Zionists, onlookers who do not bother to inform themselves are likely to come away with the idea that Zionism is one suspect extreme in a quarrel between extremists. To prevent this consequence, scholars with no special interest in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict must be persuaded not simply to reserve judgment but to abstain, if they must abstain, loudly. That is, they must come to understand that it is important to speak publicly against attempts to commit schools and scholarly associations to causes neither students nor faculty can claim to know much about.

The premise on which such public speech would rest, that when we don’t know, we should inquire, is, of course, the premise on which the scholarly enterprise, whether it is practiced by natural scientists or philosophers, rests. Nelson and Brahm’s project supposes what Rousseau seems to deny, that intellectuals, whatever their susceptibility to the vanity, fear, and indolence to which everyone is susceptible, will in the end, when they understand what is at stake, defend their fragile enterprise against those who see ideas only as

means to political ends. I think that Nelson and Brahm are right but that their success depends on reaching an audience—especially the scientists who have a stake in these debates but are usually left out of them—beyond the audience their collection is most likely to find. That will require a retail politics at colleges and universities, and within scholarly associations, that will be difficult and time consuming. But I know of no better guide than this book to the kinds of arguments one needs to make, or of any more heartening example of the diversity of voices and talents that can be drawn to the effort.

Jonathan Marks is a professor of politics at Ursinus College.