

Escape from the City of Brass

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The Case Against Academic Boycotts of Israel. Edited by Cary Nelson and Gabriel Noah Brahm. Chicago: MLA Members for Scholars Rights, 2014. Pp. 552.

While reviewing the *The Case Against Academic Boycotts of Israel*, I received an invitation to sign a “letter calling on scholars and librarians within Middle East studies to boycott Israeli academic institutions.” I was aware that the BDS movement had recently gained adherents among scholars affiliated with the American Studies Association, the Native American Studies Association, the Asian American Studies Association, and the African Literature Association, and with impressionable college students, frontal lobes as yet not fully formed.

In line with Charles Issawi’s dictum that “in any dispute the intensity of feeling is inverse to the value of the issues at stake,” I had, until that moment, assumed that those, experts in Asian-American literature, for example, who were most comfortable issuing calls to ostracize others had the least to lose by cutting ties with Israeli academia. Indeed, in her empirically based contribution to this volume, Tammi Rossman-Benjamin shows that a professor of Ethnic Studies working within an English department is statistically most likely to advocate a boycott of Israeli academia. The same also seemed to be the academics capable of mustering the self-importance one would need to issue one’s own foreign policy statements on various issues as well as the self-delusion to imagine that decision-makers would care.

However, scrolling through the names of the now more than 400 signatories of the Middle East studies letter, where ostracizing Israeli academia would be significantly more difficult to implement, I saw many people with whom I have interacted on a professional level over the years, people whose commitment to pure research, for lack of a better term, presumably outweighs their political views in importance, and even a few friends.

I was left with a certain bewilderment at how intelligent people professing high ethical standards would become proponents of a poorly conceived, punitive, and almost comically hypocritical program aimed to harm the careers of *other academics*. (Here I would like to be perfectly clear that I regard the idea

of an economic boycott aimed at exerting political pressure and a cultural/academic boycott as different in kind.) Perhaps it is the same sense one would have watching the spread of an illness whose mode of transmission is well known but whose victims inexplicably ignore all common sense precautions. This sentiment constitutes a central thread in the essays that make up *The Case Against Academic Boycotts of Israel*. Indeed, many essays (Bérubé, Brahm, Divine, Musher, Nelson) seek to document for posterity the manner in which BDS fever spread through idyllic college campuses, large universities, and scholarly associations having only the most tenuous connections to the world of Israeli academia.

The Case Against Academic Boycotts of Israel contains twenty-five essays that possess considerable variety, along with resources and reproductions of relevant documents. The book will be most useful to college students who feel that they lack the appropriate background knowledge to cut through the rhetorical and emotional excess surrounding these issues and confidently make contributions. Academics themselves will certainly choose their own path through the essays, depending upon their interests.

The invitation to boycott I received also took me back to my graduate student days in Middle Eastern Studies from the late '90s to mid-aughts, which at times resembled nothing so much as waking up after a night of hard drinking to find that I had inadvertently joined the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine.

There is the signature of my professor from "Problems and Methods in Middle Eastern Studies," where we learned that even though Edward Said's synthesis of Foucault, through which all knowledge is political, and Gramsci, who posits a life raft for those with sufficiently radical views, did not *work* in any meaningful sense, saying as much was simply not polite. There is one of my classmates, the head of our local chapter of Students for Justice in Palestine, my department's unofficial social club. Once the Second Intifada began in 2000, they organized vigils in the park for the martyrs from Deir Yassin (1948) to Jenin (2000).

Once I was helping a student—one of our Islamists, bless her heart—through the intricacies of a classical Arabic text. She abruptly excused herself, donned a makeshift cardboard tank with Stars of David on the sides, and headed out to join a protest. In our department the intellectual atmosphere surrounding the breakdown of peace talks was charged with giddy anticipation—if not happiness per se—a sense of relief at the line between good and evil having become suddenly clear and recognizable once again.

The essayists in *The Case Against Academic Boycotts of Israel* grapple with the question of when, exactly, the Left's disillusionment with Israel as a progressive commitment took hold and became hostility instead, for it certainly was not in 1948. Was it already in 1967, when David became Goliath through catastrophic victory? Or 1973, when a much less decisive victory received the imprimatur of Richard Nixon? Intifada II? The Durban Conference (2000)?

September 11 (2001)? Lebanon (2006), Gaza “Cast Lead” (2008–9), Gaza “Pillar of Defense (2012), or Gaza “Protective Edge” (2014)?

Days after September 11, I sat and wrote my dissertation qualifying exams in the office of a senior professor. I had been studying for that test for years and made an effort to set aside reality long enough to do a good job. But as I tried to connect topics ranging from early Islamic literature to the redaction of the *1001 Nights*, the office phone rang and rang. On the other line was another signatory of the letter, who insisted—despite my protests that I was in the middle of something not necessarily important in the grand scheme of things but important to me—that I take down a message urging the professor whose office it was to swift political activism. “We have to get the message out now,” I jotted down, quite sure that the person who called had no idea that I had no idea what the “message” was, much less how he had achieved such a level of certainty when most people were reeling.

In the contributions of Johnson, Koppelman, Nelson, and Salim, it is clear that the “message,” a hermeneutic key to the vagaries of the Middle East, is the tired Third Worldist /campist division of the world into forces of good and evil, the demonology of what Cohen calls “the Left that doesn’t learn.” More astonishing than the basic premise that Israel is an outpost of U.S. imperialism is the conclusion that *necessarily* follows: Hamas and Hezbollah are on the Global Left, as academic mega-celebrity Judith Butler famously concluded. The Hamas fighters of Gaza are invisible, both visually *and conceptually*, replaced by the theoretical stand-in that ought logically to be there.

More remarkable still, the nonviolent strategy crafted by Palestinian NGOs, foremost among them the “United and Islamic Forces in Palestine,” a group comprising Fatah, Hamas, Islamic Jihad, the PFLP, and so on, through the advocacy of the assembled academics, becomes equivalent to the claims of Justice itself. Indeed, it seems the millennia of human political experiment finally reach their apotheosis here where political claims and ideals of virtue become one. Would that Israeli scholars acceded to every demand these organizations, and, presumably, Justice itself, has made, and endeavored to make their own government’s position *identical* to the position of its enemies. Several contributors to the book emphasize that the academic boycott is coupled to apocalyptic demands for the return of all Palestinian refugees and their descendants—the most serious sticking point in years of negotiations—and the end (yes, an end!) to discrimination against Palestinians holding Israeli citizenship, presumably by Israel at long last drafting and ratifying a constitution.

Like Cambridge dons whose Leninism rendered invisible Stalin’s descent into murderous paranoia and even Soviet tanks in Hungary, this message requires those who follow it to ignore certain fairly obvious things. Pascal Bruckner has illuminated such issues with much greater depth and style. Yet here Alan Johnson’s essay is crucial for focusing more narrowly on BDS and Anti-Zionist Ideology

(AZI). Both the enthusiasm on the Left for Israel in the 1945–67 period and the Communist betrayal of the Jews are left intentionally unexamined, purged from both the Politburo and the narrative.

All variety within Zionism must be simplified to the point where major Jewish thinkers of the Left like Arendt, Kafka, Levinas, and even Ahad Ha-‘Am, who held reservations about political Zionist ideology and goals, become anti-Zionists—a veritable *canon alter-Juive* ostensibly offering a genealogy for the work of Butler et al. (See Middle East historian and boycott enthusiast Jens Hansen’s tendentious readings of Kafka and Arendt.) Just as Jewish binationalists (the Brit Shalom group, on which see Fish’s essay) sought to de-fang the Arab resistance to the Jewish domination of Palestine, today’s one-staters aim to anesthetize Jews who might object to radical redistribution of the state’s resources among Palestinians throughout the world, a process that is very difficult to imagine occurring in a nonviolent manner. Yet the former are perversely pressed into the service of the latter.

They are blind to the fact that following the destruction of European Jewry these Jewish thinkers bracketed their reservations to address what might be done to save what Trotsky’s biographer Isaac Deutscher—himself an anti-Zionist before the war—described as “a man jumping from a burning building.” Recent research suggests that notwithstanding Zionism’s prestige in that most ideological of times after the war, few Jews immigrated to Israel for ideological reasons. They went because no place else would take them other than “that shitty little country,” in the immortal words of a French diplomat.

It is a message that, in its postcolonial guise, prizes and brings to the fore cultural admixture and hybridity, but simply will not see it in Israel. Several essays shed light on this aspect of academic and cultural life in Israel: Yohanan Ratosh’s avant-garde Canaanite movement (Fish); Palestinian-Israeli novelists who write in Hebrew (Harris); Israeli-Palestinian academic cooperation (Troen); Palestinian students in Israeli university classrooms (Wolosky).

The concept of class struggle, which now stands mute, though still imposing, in the middle of anti-imperialist, postcolonial circles, represents yet another thing not to be seen. In his biting appraisal of Said’s oeuvre, Marxist thinker Aijaz Ahmad famously observed the manner in which the postcolonial paradigm gave the intellectuals from the developing world’s capitalist elites, newly planted in Western universities, “documentary proof that they had always been oppressed,” by conveniently excluding class from existence. Now, in the midst of the deepest economic malaise since the Great Depression, those willing and able to pay full tuition at the great universities of the United States and Europe increasingly belong to this group as well. At least their investments will allow them four years of angelic status before these “sons of the upper bourgeoisie,” as Party leader Georges Marchais wrote of the 1968 student protesters, “forget their

revolutionary flame in order to manage daddy's firm and exploit workers there." Needless to say, many of the '68 stalwarts went on to become professors, deans, and other middle managers at colleges and universities.

Here are intellectuals for whom expressions of solidarity with Third World revolutionary violence constitute an indulgence after a rich meal, "revolution in a velvet-lined cigar box," as SDS leader Carl Oglesby said of the cultural Marxism of Gramsci and the Frankfurt School. Moreover, such action, so slow in coming, is directed against the Israeli Left, already enervated, emaciated, and limping. In the words of Catholic University president John Garvey, the boycotters of Israeli academia "[have] decided to pour gas not on the source of the fire but on bystanders, some of whom are trying to extinguish the flames." Like a Marie Antoinette of critical theory, Judith Butler suggests that if Israeli scholars want to present papers abroad, they ought to pay their own way rather than accept institutional funds tainted by the Occupation. How many public lectures must she give to make the annual salary of the average Israeli academic? Three? Two? Perhaps only one now that she has parted ways with Zionism.

Here too are signatories with identifiably Jewish names—names that give no hint as to the depth and breadth of their attachment to Judaism in any of its forms, religious or otherwise. Are memories of a Reform Jewish parent in the mid-century Midwest *commensurate* to a person who risks jail by refusing to serve in the Israeli Defense Forces? Or is the former betting with the money of the latter? Do the former's bona fides in "committed scholarship for Palestine" atone for adolescent expressions of Zionism? How can we be sure?

Not long after the phone call that interrupted my exam-taking in September, 2001, our department held a "teach-in" and I served as a docent, ferrying audience questions to the faculty panel on index cards. There, one professor spoke of the plight of the poor in rural Egypt, another of American-aided Israeli crimes against Palestinians. We heard about the "McCarthyite" tactics of the Jewish Lobby in its attempts to muzzle radical professors. It was not clear to me—nor has it become clear with the passage of time—what any of this had to do with the nineteen bourgeois, mainly Saudi hijackers who had turned the World Trade Center into a charnel house. I suspect it was even less clear to the laypeople in the audience, a few of whom had lost their children there. During the U.S. invasion of Iraq, al-Jazeera ran around the clock in the department amphitheater, as if its Qatari producers had clambered aboard Said's life raft. Another signatory simply abandoned teaching when that war broke out, instead showing photos of civilian casualties and haranguing students on the evils of the American empire. Here are two professors who, faced, at our last professional convention, with the unenviable job of making sense of the slaughter in Syria, ingeniously (and quite improbably) attributed it to Assad's American-inspired neoliberal economic reforms and the pervasive influence of Israel.

In the *1001 Nights* tale of the City of Brass, a group of adventurers discover a magic city at the edge of the world, full of perils and festooned with poems affirming the “*ubi sunt* motif,” the idea that every person with power will be reduced to nothingness. Only when they realize that the fearsome queen of the City is dead, merely a corpse made to look alive by the city’s last living denizens, do they escape their dangerous self-deception.

There among the signatories of the letter is my classmate, whose keen Jewdar enabled him to find Zionism in the most unlikely individuals, even one who is a reliable signatory of letters such as these, and a soldier in the ranks of committed scholarship on Palestine. (Similarly, Norman Finkelstein, arguably the only academic victim of the fabled Jewish Lobby, has now been exposed by some as a Zionist stooge.) I had wondered what happened to this sharp-eyed sentry of ideological purity, and here he is—ensconced in a university with tenure!

One particular incident involving this person sticks in my memory. In an email s/he pilloried a fellow grad student for having the temerity to suggest that opposition to ethnic nationalism does not in itself explain why all of its excesses must be laid at the doorstep of Zionism, calling this line of questioning “a sure-fire way NOT to get a job after graduation.” Others were willing to support the offender’s position in private but would not say so in public for the same reason, so the offender dropped out.

The myth of the professor conducting research, unfettered by political or social considerations—indeed—enwrapped in the warm embrace of academic freedom, emerging from solitude only to fire up bright young neurons and speak her conscience, is regrettably common and is, moreover, encouraged by the profession itself. In reality, one finds in academia as many careerists keen on fitting in with prevailing professional cultures as in any other job.

There is the signature of our watchdog’s doctoral advisor, who organized a successful campaign to discourage one of the best universities in America from hiring a job candidate who was too sympathetic to America (*sic*). That brave soul now teaches in a country where contact with Israeli academics is *forbidden by law*.

There is the senior professor who interviewed me a few years ago for a job at a great university. My CV contains ample evidence of my complicity in Israeli academia—knowledge of Hebrew secondary sources, conferences, and so on. But I am reassured to know that only now, after the second Israel–Gaza war, would this person allow their political convictions to influence their professional decisions.

There is someone who is included in a grant proposal I wrote. Will s/he still want to work on the project after reading this piece? Over here is someone who is reviewing my new book. *Gulp*. Hopefully this piece will be published after that one.

Here are department chairs, their own junior (untenured) colleagues, their graduate students, and even some of the vulnerable adjuncts who make up the

bulk of America's teaching faculty, extended networks of patronage, publication, grants, admissions, and hiring laid bare.

And then there are my friends. In a *Washington Post* op-ed, signatory Vijay Prashad argued that academics should boycott Israeli academia because "only 407 [Israeli faculty] signed [a petition on behalf of Palestinian faculty]." In the statement I was asked to sign, the number of good Israelis had dwindled to "several dozen."

In the Torah, Abraham argues with God over His plan to destroy Sodom: "Wilt Thou indeed sweep away the righteous with the wicked?" (Gen. 18:20). According to the deal worked out by God and Abraham, even ten righteous people would have meant calling off the operation. In the Jewish mystical tradition, the sage Shimon Bar Yohai caught wind of a new plan of God's to purify the earth of sinners. In the mode of Abraham, he convinced the avenging angels that even if sinful humanity encompassed but one righteous person (perhaps the rabbi himself) they ought to abandon their plan. (I presume this discussion's applicability to intellectual responses to Gaza is not lost on my readers. One need not adopt Hamas's agenda to want to do something—anything—for the innocent Gazans killed, maimed, and further radicalized in the last war.)

I suspect that my friends reasoned that because the campaign is non-violent, their signature represented a mainly symbolic gesture of support for a long-oppressed people. Yet nonviolence is not necessarily victimless. Essays by Berman and Hirsch are well worth reading in this regard. The latter describes the situation in Great Britain, where the academic culture has gone significantly further into the BDS morass. Here on the list of signatories is Mona Baker, the British academic who dismissed two Israelis from journals she edited. Their anti-Occupation credentials were not enough to outweigh their Israeli citizenship.

Here on the list of signatories is the director of a Federal Title VI Middle East Center. Where it had always been easy to discriminate against an applicant by claiming s/he "would not be a good *fit* for us," without ever creating an actionable paper trail, what will happen when members of an admissions, hiring, or grant-giving committee were already on the record as actively promoting the ostracism of one nationality from academe? Calls for academic boycott of Israel will no doubt create new problems for university attorneys and HR staff at both public and private institutions.

In the preface to *The Case Against Academic Boycotts of Israel*, Paul Berman introduces a useful distinction between the "gentle critic" who seeks to dissuade the boycotter via the Socratic method and the "ferocious critic" who sees the boycott as a moralistic fig leaf, barely hiding sinister motives. Among such motives, anti-Semitism looms large (see Brahm, Landes, Marcus). The decision to brand someone an anti-Semite, like the charge of racism, leaves no exit. It is a conversation stopper, but there are times when conversations go too far. Having invoked

Abraham and the Sodomites, I join the ranks of gentle critics. I think it unlikely that my friends harbor an irrational hatred of Jews. Perhaps in the spectacle of Jews oppressing others there is some of the *schadenfreude* (see Landes)—the ephemeral exemption from racism many white Americans felt when one of Al Sharpton's *causes célèbre* was unmasked as a fraud.

Yet it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that there is something uniquely wrong with the Jews when it is us (and not South Asians, Turks, and so on) who are made to collectively bear the punishment for post–World War II ethnic nationalisms and are instead offered (such generosity!) our familiar role on the Left as homeless cosmopolitans or, worse still, assigned the role of scapegoat without whose sacrifice the advancement of humanity cannot occur. This point is another thread that binds together most, if not all, of the contributions.

This is precisely where the moral hypocrisy of the academic boycotters becomes intolerable. Social psychologist C. D. Batson describes a mercantile world filled with Hobbesian actors who want others to believe that they have high moral ideals but who, when faced with acting on those ideals, will readily contravene them when no one else is looking. Thus they reap the benefits of appearing trustworthy and virtuous without having to make the sacrifices that come with acting in such a manner. In his experiments, upwards of 80 percent of subjects, faced with allotting the possibility of either reward or a dull, unrewarding task to themselves and another, unseen—indeed, non-existent—person, assigned themselves the rewarding task, even after having been reminded of the concept of fairness and having made a coin toss. Thus for a person to distribute goods in a zero-sum system among themselves (and, one might add, members of their social networks), all the while striving to appear moral in the eyes of others, is arguably part of human nature. While the zero-sum situation is perhaps extreme, these days, resources in the humanities and social sciences are scarce indeed.

Among the boycotters the moral hypocrisy is richly layered. Among *bien pensant* academics in Europe and the United States, opposition to Israel is utterly unremarkable, but they present it as a brave, even dangerous, stance in light of Israel's support in the wider society (at least in the United States). Liberal defenders of Enlightenment concepts—human rights, academic freedom, even civility itself—so carefully autopsied and buried in university seminars, are conjured back into existence when members of the collective feel threatened. For them, every victory is a victory and every loss is a victory too. (Edelman's essay offers that their tactics are simply part of a broad strategy of decreasing support for Israel among students. Recent reports of a generation gap in such attitudes may support this contention.) Here is a nonviolent campaign given its very appeal by the romantic and transgressive thrill of revolutionary Third Worldist violence. At first blush it looks like a risky yet principled bet, but they do not make it with their own money and instead transfer the risk to others (on real bravery, see Budick's essay).

If realizing the boycotters' ambitious goals nonviolently proved impossible and the spoils of the Jewish State needed to be divvied up by the refugees and their descendants, would this vanguard of progressivism lobby for visas for the Jewish survivors, find them housing in Berkeley, Morningside Heights, or the West Village? Why should they when they deserve what they have coming?

Unless a person lives up to his own standards in every single instance or simply holds no standards whatsoever, the charge of hypocrisy seems something of a cop-out. In Poland, Rabbi Yisrael Hopsztajn (d. 1814), a miracle-working Hasidic *Rebbe*, was a frail man who lived on little. He was "nothing but skin and bones," and his disciples covered him with blankets and carried him about. Once he asked a wealthy Hasid: "What do *you* eat every day?" and the rich man said: "Very little. My needs are simple. Bread, salt, and water are enough for me." Instead of complimenting him the Rabbi reproved him.

Your way is not the good way. You should eat fattened chickens and drink wine.
For if you eat well you will give bread to the poor. But if your menu consists of
dry bread, you will begrudge the poor even stones.

This story struck Martin Buber, the German-Jewish philosopher, ambivalent Zionist, member of the *Brit Shalom* binationalist group, and one of the founders of the Hebrew University, as being a particularly profound one. In it, the *Rebbe* confronts a moral hypocrite. Rather than pointing out the rich man's vanity, he takes it as a given that a human being will most likely act to advance his own self-interest. To satisfy that self-interest while at the same time offering genuine help to the nameless, abstract other posited by Batson's psychological experiment, or by a progressive ideology that calls for a villain is a difficult task that requires honesty, personal sacrifice, and genuine courage without bravado or self-congratulation. It also requires the awareness, which developed in the visitors to the doomed City of Brass, that every regnant idea eventually dies and one must be especially circumspect around those who have a vested interest in concealing its death.