

What Are the Responsibilities of Academics As Public Intellectuals? The U.S. and the BDS Movement

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Something very strange is happening: In the U.S., the bastion of opposition to any form of boycott of Israel, one can see cracks in the wall. One does not want to exaggerate the recent successes because the persecution of activists is very strong and the violation of our academic freedom considerable. These oppressive conditions, until recently, have impeded a full-fledged movement. I am speaking as one of the founding members and formerly part of the Organizing Committee of the U.S. Campaign for an Academic and Cultural Boycott of Israel (USACBI, hereafter referred to as the U.S. Campaign),¹ which sprang from California Scholars for Academic Freedom, which I coordinate, and which is kept busy responding to violations of academic freedom of people of M.E. descent or Middle East scholars, within and without the California and U.S. academy. As we know, the U.S. Campaign for an Academic and Cultural Boycott of Israel is only one of many springing up all over the world, but part of the significance of the Campaign is that it is emanating from the U.S., that bastion of support for Israel, i.e., from the belly of the beast. The U.S. Campaign follows the call of PACBI, which takes the position that—

...Israeli academic institutions (mostly state controlled) and the vast majority of Israeli intellectuals and academics have either contributed directly to maintaining, defending or otherwise justifying...[various] forms of oppression, or have been complicit in them through their silence.

What I would like us to do is substitute the word “The U.S.” for “Israel” and repeat the quote:

...**U.S.** academic institutions (mostly state controlled) and the vast majority of **U.S.** intellectuals and academics have either contributed directly to maintaining, defending or otherwise justifying...[various] forms of oppression, or have been complicit in them through their silence.

This exercise symbolizes how, in many ways, the U.S. and Israel mirror each other, and U.S. academic institutions, with their vast investments in Israel, are as complicit as Israeli academic institutions in oppressing Palestinians. As I said above, the U.S. government and much of the U.S. public are, as we all know, among the bastions of opposition to any kind of boycott of Israel. And academics are among them, blindly following a powerful Zionist lobby that argues that an academic boycott of Israel would

fly in the face of academic freedom. I ask if that makes the concept of academic freedom meaningless. Is there something sacred about academia that, somehow, supposedly allows us to transcend, with our claim of “academic freedom,” other values and morals that many liberals and progressives profess to care about—such as justice and human rights? I would gladly sacrifice the oftentimes only symbolic concept (as contrasted to actualized) of academic freedom for justice and human rights. Why would Israelis such as Ilan Pappé, Neve Gordon, and Amira Hass, to name only a few, call for an academic boycott of Israel? Just as some academics like me called for an academic boycott of U.S. academics during the war in Vietnam.

In 2006 I prepared a paper entitled “If Ever There Was a Time...Academic Boycotts and Societies in Crisis...” that I was to deliver at an international Bellagio Conference that year on “Principles and Politics: Academic Boycotts in Perspective—A Conference to Discuss AAUP’s Statement of Principle.” It was organized by the American Association of University Professors (AAUP) and funded by the Ford and Rockefeller Foundations. My colleagues on this WOCMES panel—Salim Vali and Lisa Taraki—and I never delivered our papers because the conference was called off less than a week before it was to be held. Israeli universities and their U.S. lobbyists, threatened Rockefeller and Ford with charges of anti-Semitism, and the funding was withdrawn—**just like that!** It seems that Israeli academics and lobbyists were afraid even to discuss academic boycotts, even if the academic discussion was sponsored by a liberal organization—the AAUP-- that had already taken a stand against academic boycotts.

Academics are a strange lot. Many U.S. academics want to think of themselves as public intellectuals—a romantic and noble term—but shy away from owning up to the responsibilities facing them of standing up to what the U.S. government is doing to Palestinians (not to mention Iraqi and Afghans and...).

The Changing Context: This is a time when many in the U.S. (and perhaps elsewhere) are discussing whether or not we need to transform the concept of “academic freedom” to address the changing political climate and, therefore, the changing nature of universities. My implied question above was: How much academic freedom do we have in U.S. universities anyway, considering that that institutions of higher education have been increasingly subjected to “surveillance, intervention, and control”²-- changes wrought by the commercialization and privatization of the university, making the production of knowledge for the public good increasingly difficult? No matter how we define academic freedom, we still need to ask if this academic freedom makes any sense in a context of occupation and conflict, i.e., in the absence of “critiques of professional norms, national identity and hierarchical power relations.”³ What does it mean within the U.S. to refer to such an abstract freedom (that may not have any actual standing in legal terms and has remained untested as a constitutional right in the courts) in the face of the U.S. Patriot Act, the “war on terrorism,” and the incessant assaults on the public university-- perhaps the last bastion of critical inquiry in the U.S.? This is not to mention the recent resuscitation of a 1977 law (still untested) that proclaims support of any boycott of Israel or any other U.S. ally as illegal--as, in effect, aiding the “enemy.” It is not a coincidence, one can be sure, that this revival of the U.S. law parallels possible Israeli legislation that

would persecute/prosecute Israeli academics who encourage or abate an academic boycott of Israel.

We are forced to ask, in observing both the U.S. and Palestinian cases, whose freedom is being defended. Is it the freedom of Israeli academics to support their institutions that engage and enter into contracts, with impunity, to serve the very scientific and industrial might that leads to the militarization of society? The very institutions that study the colonized in order to control them better?

There are moral imperatives here: How can we discuss academic freedom in the absence of basic human rights? More explicitly, how can we take a “neutral” position (non-boycott) with the rationale that we are protecting the academic freedom (*ergo*, human rights?) of Israeli institutions/academics? Who is protecting the “academic freedom” of Palestinian institutions and academics? The portrait is clear: Palestinian education is an endangered species. And then, the assault on Gaza, was perhaps the nail in the coffin for education in the Gaza. Through the assault on Gaza schools, through all of this, there was no outcry from Israeli universities. As Ilan Pappé has reminded us:

Never in its history did the senate of any Israeli university pass a resolution protesting the frequent closures of Palestinian universities, let alone voice protest over the devastation sowed there during the last uprising...Israeli academia continues to do practically nothing to bring the facts to public attention.⁴

Through all of the withholding of education from Palestinians, Israeli academics continue to enjoy material advantages internationally—e.g., visiting teaching posts, fellowships, having their articles published in international journals, getting their books published, receiving general academic funding, and traveling at will. Shahid Alam argues, as do many, that Israeli educational institutions, as arms of the state, are serving the state “through their links with the military, the political parties, the media, and the economy.”⁵ We could, obviously, make the same argument about U.S. institutions in the 21st century, as I mentioned above, as mirroring the Israeli conditions. In other words, we can trace the direct military relationships among education, politics, and economics in U.S. society at large. Besides, as Mona Baker claims for Israel, “Israeli academic and research institutions are a major source of prestige, legitimacy and income for Israel.”⁶ Whose academic freedom is being supported? Where are the U.S. “public intellectuals” when we need them most?

Academics should use any non-violent measures at our disposal to protect all aspects of the educational system of Palestinians.

The U.S. Campaign for the Academic and Cultural Boycott of Israel: We would like you to know some of the work of the U.S. Campaign and, perhaps, join us. We are a relatively new organization that emerged during the crisis of Gaza. We have a relatively small but efficient and hardworking organizing committee of some twenty members, but an endorsement list of nearly 500 and growing, in addition to Advisory and

Honorary Committees. We have supported a number of U.S. and European institutions in their boycott campaigns, initiated our own, and have been quite successful in our cultural boycott campaigns and direct demonstrations of Israeli cultural institutions such as dance troupes, etc. We have entered into various coalitions across the country. Because the U.S. is such a celebrity-obsessed country, campaigning to gain the support of celebrity artists—musical and literary—has had the effect of raising the visibility of the BDS campaign, in general. Nonetheless, we are striving for more visibility. Our website lists our various activities, as well as other BDS activities in the U.S. and elsewhere and lays out what others can do.

Toward that end I distributed copies of the front pages of our website statement and will pass around sign-up sheets for committee work or endorsement. It is our responsibility toward the common good.⁷

Notes

¹ I am not speaking “officially” as a member of the organization; i.e., I am not a spokesperson on this occasion. I am speaking only as an invited individual member of the WOCMES panel.

² Beshara Doumani, “*Between Coercion and Privatization: Rethinking Academic Freedom in the Twenty-First Century*,” in Doumani, ed., *Academic Freedom After September 11* (New York: Zone Books, 2006).

³ *Ibid.*, p. 1.

⁵ Shahid Alam, “The Academic Boycott of Israel,” quoted in Mona Baker and Lawrence Davidson, “In Defense of the Boycott,” *Counterpunch*, September 18, 2003), p. 3.

⁶ Mona Baker, Conference paper for “Resisting Israeli Apartheid: Strategies and Principles,” London, December 5, 2004, “On the Distinction between Institutions and Individuals,” p. 1.

⁷ The U.S. Campaign for an Academic and Cultural Boycott of Israel’s website location is <http://usacbi.wordpress.com/>