

Around the BDS movement in support of the Palestinian people's struggle - A Political Witch-Hunt in the Name of "Academic Freedom": In Defense of the American Studies Association

Thursday 6 February 2014, by [WALD Alan](#) (Date first published: 5 February 2014).

The following essay will appear in the forthcoming March-April 2014 issue of *Against the Current*. The editors look forward to further dialogue around the complex issues raised here. While this article's focus is the controversy around the recent resolution adopted by the American Studies Association, readers looking for background on the broader Boycott/Divestment/Sanctions (BDS) movement in support of the Palestinian people's struggle might be interested in two previous ATC articles: "A BDS Movement that Works," by Barbara Harvey [1], and "BDS Campaign Sweeps UC Campuses," by Rahim Kurwa [2].

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In Memory of Edward Said (1935-2003)

"You cannot continue to victimize someone else just because you yourself were a victim once—there has to be a limit."

— Edward W. Said, "The Myth of 'The Clash of Civilizations,'" 1998

"A man once jumped from the top floor of a burning house in which many members of his family had already perished. He managed to save his life; but as he was falling he hit a person standing down below and broke that person's legs and arms. The jumping man had no choice; yet to the man with the broken limbs he was the cause of his misfortune. If both behaved rationally, they would not

become enemies."

— Isaac Deutscher, *The Non-Jewish Jew and Other Essays*, 1968

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Imagine my surprise. For decades I have passively endured ritualistic sneering about the irrelevance of nerdy scholars in ivory towers, derision at the notion that we who toil in the archives might have an impact on anything of national significance. Then, on December 16, 2013, the membership of an almost unknown and relatively petite professional organization to which I belong, the American Studies Association (ASA), ratified a convention resolution to participate in an "academic boycott" of Israeli universities to bring to light discrimination against Palestinians.

Starting with headlines in the New York Times¹ and Washington Post², the ASA decree became the vote heard round the world. Every wing of the establishment suddenly went thug by playing a new game that might be called "Whac-a-Prof."

In the Israeli press, the mostly hostile coverage was updated every day for weeks. In the United States, news of the ASA motion elicited not only the predictable effort to silence debate with charges of "anti-Semitism," but also a torrent of abuse, outrage, and threats of lawsuits.³ Soon it was widely reported that more than 200 college and university presidents had come out opposing the ASA's vote, along with the American Council on Education, the Association of Public and Land-Grant Universities, the Association of American Universities, and the American Association of University Professors (AAUP). When I last checked, six American Studies programs had terminated affiliation with ASA, and eleven more asked to be de-listed.⁴

On January 14, 2014 came a letter of 144 members of the U.S. Congress to ASA President Curtis Marez, charging ASA with creating a "blacklist."⁵ Hate mail of the most vile kind was sent to ASA members, especially those with Arab-sounding names, although Jewish supporters of the resolution were grotesquely besieged as well.⁶ One authority on academic freedom noted that "the American Studies Association has become the Emmanuel Goldstein of our times, the mythical object of the daily two minutes of hate in the novel 1984."⁷

Reported the Chronicle of Higher Education, "the Association has itself become the target of widespread criticism and ostracism. It has gone from relative obscurity to prominence as a pariah of the American higher-education establishment."⁸ Raging tantrums over the boycott haven't been confined to the Right. Michael Kazin, a specialist on U.S. radicalism and editor of Dissent, decried the ASA proposal as "idiotic" in a piece featured in the New Republic⁹, while the Chair of American Studies at Brandeis University, a respected specialist on film in the McCarthy era, ranted on the History News Network that the ASA "has completely gone off its rocker" with its "boneheaded boycott."¹⁰

Luckily, I'm protected by tenure; but the present atmosphere in the academic departments of such senior scholars can't be very reassuring for any student, lecturer or untenured faculty sharing my view that the aim of the resolution was an inspiring act of political solidarity, even if there might have been glitches in its precise language or the ASA decision-making process. Despite the self-righteous insults, and the demagogic conjoining of "boycott" to "academic freedom," the actual resolution passed by ASA can be assessed as an effort to expand the academic freedom of Palestinians (and therefore all of us) by what amounts to a symbolic slap on the wrist that draws attention to complicity in discrimination of Israeli educational institutions.¹¹

Ironically, the ASA concept of academic freedom is mostly the same as that of its critics. The ASA document clearly states: "Whereas the American Studies Association is dedicated to the right of

students and scholars to pursue education and research without undue state interference, repression, and military violence, and in keeping with the spirit of its previous statements supports the right of students and scholars to intellectual freedom and to political dissent as citizens and scholars..."

The critical difference is that the ASA resolution is for including Palestinians in its concerns: "Whereas there is no effective or substantive academic freedom for Palestinian students and scholars under conditions of Israeli occupation, and Israeli institutions of higher learning are a party to Israeli state policies that violate human rights and negatively impact the working conditions of Palestinian scholars and students..."¹²

Breaking a Taboo

While the elements and extent of the backlash, suggestions for an appropriate response, and thoughts about strengths and weaknesses of a boycott approach are the subjects of this essay, I must begin by stating that the achievement of ASA ought to be fêted by all supporters of Palestinian (and other) human rights. Its passage dramatically shattered what Edward Said called "America's Last Taboo," the prohibition of an open and candid public discussion of the realities of Israeli policy and U.S. support.¹³

The action was also beneficial in consolidating international ties for defenders of Palestinian rights by bringing strong statements of gratitude to ASA from the Middle East and elsewhere by critics of U.S. and Israeli state policy. For those advocates of the Palestinian-led Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions (BDS) strategy, from which the ASA took inspiration, the victorious balloting was a clear boost for the movement in this country.¹⁴

The explanation for the astounding reaction to the passage of a resolution by such a powerless group as ASA is that BDS, a global non-violent movement demanding compliance with international law and Palestinian rights, is plainly catching on internationally; it now stands as the most effective form of solidarity activity for those who wish to continue the traditions of the U.S. civil rights and South African anti-apartheid struggles, even in these difficult times.¹⁵

Prior to the ASA vote, only the Association for Asian American Studies had taken a position in support of BDS last April.¹⁶ Then, afterwards, the Native American and Indigenous Studies Association did the same.¹⁷ Next, on January 11, 2014, the Delegate Assembly of the Modern Languages Association (MLA, a 30,000 member organization of literature scholars) approved by a small margin a motion to put pressure on the US government to condemn Israel for alleged arbitrary denials of entry of US academics into Gaza and the West Bank.¹⁸

The BDS website lists numerous successes throughout the world and maintains that the movement has reached an authentic "turning point."¹⁹ On January 24 activist-scholar Vijay Prashad was given a prominent "Opinions" column in the Washington Post²⁰, and on February 2 the New York Times Sunday Review featured a defense of the BDS movement by Omar Barghouti, founder of the Palestinian Campaign for the Academic and Cultural Boycott of Israel (PACBI).²¹

What must never be displaced from center stage in this discussion of the ASA controversy is that that the situation is dire for the human rights and academic freedom of Palestinians; remedial action is long overdue. Against the Current has regularly reported on the horrors of the 46-year occupation (the longest military occupation in modern history), the deadly blockade of Gaza, the escalation of violence, and the expansion of illegal settlements.²² But the debate around the ASA resolution means that our journal and the rest of the Palestinian rights movement must pay greater attention to

two other areas.

One of these issues is the virtual absence of academic freedom for scholars and students at Palestinian universities, who are subject to the refusal of the entitlement to travel abroad; the denial of the right of freedom of assembly; arrests; deportations; closures; physical attacks on students by settlers; and killings.

The second is the systematic discrimination of Israeli universities against admission of Palestinians (who are 20% of the population of Israel but only 10% of the university student body); the repression of political activity on Israeli campuses perceived as anti-Israeli or pro-Palestinian; the military-intelligence research carried out in collaboration with universities that enables the occupation; the construction of campuses and dormitories in violation of international law in occupied Palestinian territory; and the attacks on intellectual freedom through the so-called “Nakba Law” and “Boycott Law.”²³

Although small numbers of faculty at Israeli universities have admirably contested the lack of freedom for Palestinians, the overall acquiescence is disturbing, recalling the silence about racism of most U.S. professors during the Jim Crow era. Some evidence of the relationship of forces in Israel between those who are complicit and those who speak truth to power may be seen in the 2008 letter of protest about academic rights for Palestinians sent to 9000 professors but signed by only 400.²⁴

Convicted by Kangaroo Court

Anyone familiar with how the mainstream press and university administrations have historically responded to criticisms of Israeli state policy, even before the current pogrom against ASA, need only sniff the wind to get the pungent whiff of a kangaroo court. Most of the published attacks employ identical hackneyed clichés to run roughshod over nuance, a blend of hyperbole and invective.

“The academic boycott of Israel voted for last month by the American Studies Association is the latest example of an anti-Semitism cloaked in the garb of political correctness,” declared a history professor at Drexel University.²⁵ “This resolution runs contrary to the underlying spirit and principle of academic freedom, which seeks to protect intellectual inquiry and debate across a wide range of viewpoints and human experience,” announced the president of Brooklyn College.²⁶ “Under the guise of phony progressivism, the group has initiated an irresponsible attack on academic freedom,” wrote the President of Wesleyan University.²⁷

“Academic Freedom” is a commendable but complex and variously interpreted ideal maintaining that faculty members must be free of anything that might inhibit “the search for truth and its free exposition” in their scholarship and teaching.²⁸ Almost everyone claims to support this principle, but what this means in practice can be harder to discern. Strictly speaking, it is usually taken to affirm that an academic institution cannot punish scholars for expressing controversial opinions in their research, or for holding unorthodox political or philosophical notions expressed elsewhere. The focus is on norms of professional scholarship, not necessarily congruent with “free speech”; for example, scholars do not have the “right” to promote false ideas in academic publications or the classroom.

More commonly, and problematically, the concept of academic freedom is taken to mean that there should be no interference with a scholar’s right to pursue his or her work, to carry out free inquiry. The difficulty with the malleability of this latter definition is that one can make a verbal charge of violating academic freedom wherever one sees a potential obstacle — big or small — to carrying out

one's standard activities; this includes the inconveniences, disruptions, and deprivation of resources that will always occur when the less powerful organize collective protests against the unfair, discriminatory, and secretive practices of an institution.

None of this is to suggest that academic freedom is simply an ideological mask for domination. My reading in this area pushes me in the opposite direction; to the extent that academic freedom exists, it is a precious achievement gained through struggles by the Left that must be extended to all.²⁹ But it is evident that academic freedom is a phrase or slogan that can be mobilized for myriad ends, including the legitimization of existing privilege or even the perpetration of discrimination and oppression.

From the political Right, the "Intelligent Design Movement" (promoting a theological alternative to evolution) fights for "Academic Freedom Bills" to require increased exposure of its views in classrooms; it interprets freedom as the externally-enforced imposition in the science curriculum of a belief viewed by most scholars as unscientific. Similarly, David Horowitz's "Students for Academic Freedom" has campaigned for an "Academic Bill of Rights" demanding a judicial regulation of colleges to ensure inclusion of conservative views and of faculty due to an alleged Left-wing bias on campus.³⁰

On the Left, there is a long tradition of fighting for the expansion of academic and other freedoms through student strikes, classroom boycotts, and building takeovers, usually targeting discriminatory practices such as anti-Semitism (as in the City College of New York boycott in 1948-9), racism (the "Freedom Day" boycott in Chicago in 1963), lack of free speech (UC Berkeley, 1963-4), and university complicity with the military-industrial complex through classified research (late 1960s).

These unruly actions persist in attenuated forms to the present, sometimes for ethical reasons but mostly to expand opportunities for the academically disenfranchised as well as to increase the boundaries of disciplinary fields that are studied. Nevertheless, such temporary disturbances of regular university operations invariably bring charges from liberals as well as conservatives that academic freedom is being impeded if not destroyed by the students.³¹

Radicals hold a different view. For example, when the Black student group "Harvard Afro" and a chapter of SDS (Students for a Democratic Society) protested a course called "Riot Control" at Harvard University in 1969, 108 faculty members placed this ad in *The Crimson*: "A university community dedicated to free inquiry and discussion cannot tolerate any interference with, or disruption of, its academic exercise....To preserve academic freedom in the University, we request the administration to take measures appropriate to assure the inviolability of instruction and examinations in all duly approved courses."³²

Leaders of Harvard SDS defended the Black students in the *Crimson* as follows: "The recent petition sponsored by a Faculty group uses platitudes about academic freedom to cover up the main issue of racism at Harvard and is thus a direct attack on the Black students who stopped the riot control course."³³

The Meanings of Freedom

Such episodes, in varying contexts and circumstances, suggest that differences about the role and responsibility of a university are not necessarily about the ideals of academic freedom; they are more frequently due to conflicting assessments of how academic freedom should be realized under specific conditions. More precisely, when issues of racial and ethnic bias are involved, the issue may be whether or not a limited interference with one aspect of university operations might produce

larger benefits for groups suffering discrimination.

Such clashing usages of academic freedom are germane to the present conflict in many ways. ASA, in its moderate embrace of the tradition of the more militant protests against anti-Semitism in the 1940s and racism in the 1960s, is willing to propose a minor disruption in academic life; the aim, however, is to start a discussion about ending discrimination against the academic freedom of Palestinian faculty and students.

ASA's opponents, for a variety of reasons, ranging from a different assessment of Israel to disagreement on strategy, feel this to be outrageous. But surely one of the most bizarre twists in this whole debate is that several of the institutions whose presidents are piously seizing the moral high ground of academic freedom against ASA are themselves complicit in what many of us would consider to be denials of academic freedom and worse.

New York University's President John Sexton falsely assails ASA for disavowing the "free exchange of scholars that gird academic freedom as such," even as his own institution complies with a gross instance of exclusion of all Israeli academics.³⁴ NYU has a campus in Abu Dhabi, part of the United Arab Emirates. In this country, Israeli citizens are banned from entering and partnerships with Israeli universities are strictly forbidden.³⁵

How Not to Read Texts

What readers of the mainstream press may gain from the calibrated verbal assaults of the anti-ASA scholars and presidents cited above is a lesson in how not to read texts; their "interpretations" of the ASA position provide repeated demonstrations of the use of language to obscure inconvenient truths from oneself as well as others.

Although the ASA resolution plainly explicates why Israeli institutions were chosen, due to Israel's unique relation to the United States, almost every anti-ASA remonstrance play-acts that the selection could only have come from anti-Jewish prejudice. A truncated quotation from the New York Times by Curtis Marez on the matter of Israel's selection went viral, and then the Times refused Marez either an op ed or letter-to-the editor to respond, an embargo replicated by the Los Angeles Times and Washington Post.³⁶

Out of the blue, Israel is declared to be off limits as the target of a boycott; the reason is that it is benign compared to North Korea. One is supposed to believe that there exists some universally accepted "worst first" rule for choosing one's targets of protest. If such a principle existed, the boycotts carried out by our Civil Rights movement in mid-century would have had to defer to the campaign against the more vile South Africa, which in turn would have had to defer to one against Cambodia's nightmare of Pol Pot.

The point is that Israel's policies, like those of the Jim Crow South, are sufficiently bad to demand action by those of us financially and militarily enabling it with three-and-a-half billion dollars a year.³⁷

In contrast to such flimflam, the ASA resolution itself, available online [3], is a stirring defense of academic and intellectual freedom for all, which is presented as the grounds on which ASA "will honor the call of Palestinian civil society for a boycott of Israeli academic institutions." But honoring the call is not the same as parroting it. The ASA National Council's many pages of documents elaborating the meaning of this formula include only one minor instance where a "boycott" action will be applicable:

“The ASA understands boycott as limited to a refusal on the part of the ASA in its official capacities to enter into formal collaborations with Israeli academic institutions, or with scholars who are expressly serving as representatives or ambassadors of those institutions (such as deans, rectors, presidents and others), or on behalf of the Israeli government, until Israel ceases to violate human rights and international law. We are expressly not endorsing a boycott of Israeli scholars engaged in individual-level contacts and ordinary forms of academic exchange, including presentations at conferences, public lectures at campuses, and collaboration on research and publication. U.S. scholars are not discouraged under the terms of the boycott from traveling to Israel for academic purposes, provided they are not engaged in a formal partnership with or sponsorship by Israeli academic institutions. The academic boycott of Israeli institutions is not designed to curtail dialogue. Rather, it emerges from the recognition that these forms of ordinary academic exchange are often impossible for Palestinian academics due to Israeli policies. We also recognize that there are inherent difficulties in parsing these distinctions, and that ASA members will want to engage in discussion about guidelines for action.”

In a further clarification of the resolution’s intention of expanding rather than limiting academic freedom, the non-binding character of the resolution is made explicit: “the ASA recognizes that members will review and negotiate specific guidelines for implementation on a case-by-case basis and adopt them according to their individual convictions.”

This is among the reasons why media scholar Siva Vaidhyanathan of the University of Virginia observed: “The boycott has no effect on ‘academic freedom.’ And I say that as a fervent opponent of the boycott. The fact that academics default to that phrase only shows the poverty of the level of thought about the issue. There are a dozen good reasons to oppose the boycott. But ‘academic freedom’ is not one of them.”³⁸

ASA and BDS

The ASA was, in effect, approving a highly modified version of the “mission statement” for Academic and Cultural Boycott that emerged from the BDS campaign, which can be read for comparison [4]. BDS, which is not itself the subject of this essay, is an international movement of non-violent protest that started around 2005 with a call from 171 non-governmental Palestinian organizations. Following a series of panels held at ASA meetings over several years, a petition drive supporting BDS (but not mentioning culture) began among ASA members at the 2012 national convention in Puerto Rico.

In late fall 2013, the short resolution appearing on the original petition³⁹ was substantially revised by the ASA National Council, which unanimously endorsed its own document bringing together both pro-boycott and pro-academic freedom arguments on December 4. That version was then placed before the membership. The vote of ASA members, occurring over ten days in late December, was 827 in favor, 382 opposed, and 43 abstaining. This meant a total of 1, 252 votes, with 66.1% in favor, 30.5% opposed, 3.4% abstaining.

Although a few sources say that ASA claims a membership of 5,000, the Chronicle of Higher Education reported that the eligible voters were only 3,853.⁴⁰ (One possible explanation for varying membership numbers is that ASA might give a “grace period” of some time after one fails to pay dues, meaning that one is counted as a member but ineligible to vote.)

Apparently the numbers of members who voted in December is much higher than is usually the case in ASA balloting, although I haven’t seen comparative figures. While one can point to distressing defects in the ASA’s decision-making process regarding timing and venues of information, the vote

on the resolution was unusually democratic: previous ASA resolutions of a political nature, including a 2006 statement of opposition to the war in Iraq,⁴¹ were decided solely by the National Council.

Strategic and Tactical Issues

As always, there are some hiccups in what has occurred so far, and it would be useful for some venue to provide further discussion on the Left about the strategy of academic/cultural boycotts, as opposed to the tactic of targeted protests as well as economic campaigns (where BDS got its start). The latter seem to be widely accepted by both the anti-occupation Left and those seeking a long range solution to the contending rights and needs for security of all people in the Middle East. It is not yet clear whether the broad and diverse activism around the occupation and Palestinian rights will be ultimately united or sharply divided by the more recent elevation of academic/cultural boycott strategy, especially if it becomes a “litmus test” for authentic solidarity with Palestinians.

Surely an unintended consequence of the strategy of academic boycott is that the announced target of Israeli institutions, despite the wishes of BDS supporters, actually channels most political discussion in the wrong direction. At the end of his fascinating on-line moderated dialogue about boycotts and academic freedom, Political Scientist Cory Robin observes:

“Finally, you’ll notice that nowhere in this discussion does the academic freedom of Palestinian scholars come up. That’s not a fault of the participants...it’s a mirror of how the larger discussion in this country has gone down. Here we are, twisting ourselves into pretzels in order to figure out how exactly the academic freedom of an Israeli scholar is being violated, when it wouldn’t require a high school sophomore more than a moment’s reflection to see how it is routinely violated in Palestine. Have American academics ever put this much effort into worrying about the academic freedom of Palestinians?”⁴²

Thus the breaking of the “taboo” concerning the subject matter, while exhilarating to the already convinced, has not necessarily resulted in the kind political clarification that might focus public opinion on one of the most misunderstood and confusing topics in contemporary politics.

What about alternatives? A challenging essay, “Against the Law,” [\[5\]](#) by Mezna Qato and Kareem Rabie appearing in the 10th issue of *Jacobin*, argues that BDS is “problematic” because it “pivots movement strategy on bodies of law that emerged in order to regulate imperialism, and that often function to legalize Israeli colonization and colonialism.”⁴³

How this argument might translate into effective political intervention isn’t yet clear, but other proposed courses of action are in the air. These include the idea that professional organizations might call for a “censure” of Israeli institutions (in the manner of AAUP); engage in a strenuous campaign of touring Israeli Jewish and Palestinian professors to get out the truth about the absence of academic freedom; and initiate relentless targeted protests. The last is the option currently used to good effect by the Middle East Studies Association, which conjoins a defense of academic freedom for Palestinians in the Middle East with that of beleaguered critics of Israel in the United States.⁴⁴

Could there have been a sharper articulation of the actual relationship of the ASA resolution to the BDS mission statement, one resembling some of the individual acknowledgments now being made by ASA officials? Most recently, the outgoing ASA President Matthew Frye Jacobson gave the following interview indicating that the use of the term “boycott” was mistaken:

“The ASA’s decision to use the word “boycott” was not entirely accurate, and was only made in an attempt to align with words used in the larger BDS movement, Jacobson said. Jacobson added that

*the ASA's move was "99 percent symbolic," and that he did not expect the backlash revolving around the implications of the boycott for academic freedom at American and Israeli institutions. "We truly did envision this as a conversation starter," he said. "It has started [a] conversation, but it wasn't the one we expected."*⁴⁵

There has also been a new clarification by incoming ASA President Lisa Duggan that involves clause #12 of the BDS "mission statement." This clause forbids "advising on hiring or promotion decisions at Israeli universities through refereeing the work of candidates, or refereeing research proposals for Israeli funding institutions. Such services, routinely provided by academics to their profession, must be withheld from complicit institutions."⁴⁶

In response to a critical essay that quotes this text, Duggan tweeted: "ASA did not sign on to BDS or to the PACBI guidelines. We created our own terms for participation in academic boycott. So the fact that our policies conflict in some cases with those guidelines is not a sign of 'confusion,' but of the ways our terms depart in some ways from the guidelines."⁴⁷

The above speculations, regarding alternatives to the ASA approach as well as the need to publicize clarifications along the lines of Jacobson's and Duggan's remarks, are just conjecture, thinking out loud but also reproducing a few of the ideas that have circulated mainly in private conversations or e-mail exchanges among individuals concerned about what to do next. No one would suggest that these and other possible modifications would have prevented the ritualistic clubbing of the Left by the usual suspects; but why give one's opponents a sledgehammer to use on top of their clubs?

Even prior to the ASA vote, some of the most forthright critics of Israeli state policy pointed to potential dangers that reside in a strategy of academic and cultural boycotts.⁴⁸ One wonders if a discussion of contending strategies for building the U.S. anti-war movement in the 1960s might also be of some relevance to this investigation, as well as a careful review of the circumstances under which the strategy of the U.S. anti-apartheid movement was forged.⁴⁹

ASA's Process

The deliberative process that occurred in ASA was relatively democratic as these things go. Some opponents of the resolution clearly set out to throw gasoline on the fire, and a few of the older members in opposition subsequently revealed that they held a longer animus against the growing embrace of ethnic studies, queer studies and postcolonial studies in ASA and its journal, *American Quarterly*.⁵⁰ But others had some justification for discomfort in their sense that the pro-boycott supporters had taken full control over the microphone, picking and choosing what information would be included in the discourse, and dictating terms under which debate proceeds.

This may be an exaggerated perception, but it was strengthened by the failure of ASA to reproduce on its website a letter of eight of its former presidents objecting to the resolution (and providing a flimsy excuse), and the disconcerting fact that the National Council (which many thought would be a representative body) was unanimously behind the final resolution.

George Lipsitz, a Professor in the Department of Black Studies at UC Santa Barbara, who had just won ASA's Angela Y. Davis Prize for Public Scholarship, made three excellent criticisms of the voting process in his statement of support for the boycott resolution: "It would have been better if the supporters of the resolution had gone to the membership first and waged a long educational campaign inside the organization and built consensus on this issue, rather than making a top-down decision to rush to a vote. It would have been better if the tactic of the boycott could have been considered in competition with other strategies. It would be good if all sides in the debate realized

that no one has a monopoly on virtue.”⁵¹ These opinions were immediately rebutted by the customary talking points of a pro-BDS spokesperson,⁵² but I think Lipsitz was accurate.⁵³

Building a Movement

I see the boycott advocates in ASA as principled, well-intentioned people using a very limited boycott effort to achieve greater freedom and social justice, a contemporary expression of the U.S. Civil Rights and anti-apartheid movements. I salute them.

It is also obvious, however, that the transition from BDS’s original boycotting of academia for human rights into ASA’s current boycotting for academic freedom is confusing to lots of people; some misunderstandings are not simply the result of propaganda by “Israel Right-or-Wrong” types.⁵⁴ Is it surprising that ordinary people might respond the way the late Pete Seeger did when asked about academic/cultural boycotting: “I understand why someone would want to boycott a place financially, but I don’t understand why you would boycott dialogue”?⁵⁵

For many activists, economic boycotts are associated chiefly with progressive struggles against discrimination, such as in Harlem and Montgomery; in contrast, boycotts against culture and academe mainly bring to mind anti-Communist blacklisting, the blockade against Cuba, and censorship of controversial writing. Some of us recall (perhaps mistakenly) the anti-apartheid campaign mainly as one for “divestment,” along with some targeted protests involving cultural events or university practices.

If one wants to reach out and build a movement, one has to formulate demands that minimize misunderstandings, and not jump to the conclusion that anyone who raises Seeger-like queries is concealing invidious motives.

The insistence that ASA will be able to boycott “institutions” but not the “people” who comprise them is not as crystal clear as some insist. Is it accurate to suggest that no scholars will be inconvenienced in their work and activity? What about those seeking official ASA support for Fulbright Fellowships in Israel, or seeking grants through ASA for collaboration with Israeli universities?

Although the numbers of people affected here may be small, and the far more beleaguered Palestinians should receive our main attention, this aspect should candidly be acknowledged.⁵⁶ Protests always cause inconvenience, and sometimes great inconvenience (even if inaccurately decried as an attack on academic freedom) is required to right a wrong.

The Real Threat to Academic Freedom

On the other hand, there is in fact a pending major threat to academic freedom; that is, overt repression and a blacklisting threat for one’s holding controversial views unrelated to professional work. This comes as a result of the backlash of attacks on ASA — not from the resolution. The explicit targeting of individuals is being generated by several campus organizations and publications that publish photographs and lists of names of professors who allegedly voted in favor of the resolution.

In the grand tradition of academic witch-hunting, these enumerations almost always contain inaccuracies, including names of long deceased faculty, faculty not on the campus, and non-ASA members. Examples can be found at Dartmouth College,⁵⁷ Emory University,⁵⁸ and the national

website that claims to list faculty members supporting BDS, ASA, and other boycott resolutions at each university in the country.⁵⁹

Equally ominous in relation to academic freedom is the campaign announced by New York Senate co-leader Jeffrey Klein (D-Bronx) and Assemblyman Dov Hikind (D-Brooklyn), in which they introduce “legislation that would cut-off state aid to public and private universities who participate in organizations which, like the ASA, discriminate against countries like Israel. The legislation, which passed the State Senate on January 28th,⁶⁰ gives colleges and universities 30 days to withdraw their support from organizations that boycott countries like Israel or else lose state funding and bonding privileges.”⁶¹

If these men were to have their way, schools would then be required to instantaneously interrupt the use of any state resources in support of organizations like the ASA. The legislation, which appears to be blocked at the moment, would also prohibit employees of New York State’s public universities from participating in conferences or activities sponsored by groups that participate in actions deemed boycotts like the ASA.

Exemplars of the double-think of ASA-bashers, Klein and Hikind, who aim to defund colleges holding academic affiliations they personally don’t like, have the nerve to declare: “Make no mistake: the ASA’s boycott is targeted discrimination against Israel that betrays the values of academic freedom that we hold dear.”⁶²

Other examples of genuine threats to academic freedom are the New York Post editorializing that it was an “outrage” that New York University professor (and incoming ASA president) Lisa Duggan could be allowed to support the boycott even though NYU’s top administrators had denounced the ASA resolution;⁶³ the unilateral statement of Indiana University President Michael A. Robbie that IU was withdrawing as an institutional member from ASA, even though he never contacted a single faculty of the department of which the funds are used to pay the fees to ASA;⁶⁴ and the demand of former Harvard University President Lawrence Summers that faculty members be banned from receiving travel funds to attend ASA meetings, which is clearly a punishment of scholars for holding political views with which he happens to disagree.⁶⁵

To Boycott or Not to Boycott

Obviously I am not an anti-boycott “absolutist,” yet I believe that academic and cultural boycotts can pose a danger to intellectual and artistic freedom, and particularly to the rights of those lacking political and economic power. So there is good reason for partisans of the oppressed, the unpopular, and the allegedly “subversive” to hesitate when handed a proposal for an academic or cultural boycott; one must judiciously examine the nature of this demand as well as the context.

However, after reading the ASA resolution with care, and hearing the recent statements of its officials, it is clear that the “boycott” aspect does not negatively impact the academic freedom of Israeli or U.S. scholars in a meaningful way, although there could be disruptive consequences that go beyond the “symbolic.” In contrast, the benefits to the academic freedom of Palestinians, should the message of the resolution be heeded, are enormous.

To be sure, there have also been some intelligent and thoughtful exchanges about whether a boycott, a voluntary choice to withhold purchasing materials or services or collaboration, actually has anything to do with academic freedom. No scholar, by virtue of academic freedom, is assured in advance that ASA or any other professional organization must collaborate with his or her institution; and ASA members would be inhibited their functioning only if the resolution of non-cooperation with

Israeli institutions were actually enforced.

Corey Robin suggests that the ASA boycott is close to what AAUP means by censure,⁶⁶ and academic freedom specialist John K. Wilson (a boycott opponent) characterizes the ASA resolution as a “non-boycott.”⁶⁷ Still, most people, including academics in other fields, are not going to read the twenty pages of explication about the meaning of the ASA resolution and consult the literature explaining the definition of academic freedom; they will hear scare words and respond accordingly.

Simply put, I think that it’s reasonable and appropriate for activists to consider whether the language of academic boycott interferes with the communication of the excellent substance regarding the principle of Palestinian rights being promoted by ASA. The fact that the political demand for academic and cultural boycott comes from Palestinian organizations is certainly compelling and must be treated with respect. But respect is not the same as knee-jerk compliance.

There may be instances where calls for solidarity from abroad contain suggestions for strategies that, at the present time in the United States, may not be the most effective ones for building a movement to achieve liberatory goals. ASA, in contrast to the two other professional organizations supporting BDS, eliminated the word “culture” from its boycott demand, and departed in other ways from BDS guidelines.

In any case, the primary responsibility at present is for the Left to counter the public attacks on ASA, not only those promoting blacklisting and repression, but also ones encouraging outside pressure groups to punish the organization, urging members to resign, egging on chapters to split, and so on. This is truly a witch-hunt being carried out in the name of academic freedom, and with the tragic complicity of a number of liberals and former New Leftists.

Conflicting assessments about aspects of the Israel/Palestine conflict can be discussed in a civil manner — that is, without inflammatory charges of anti-Semitism or racism. Instead, a number of individuals turned straightaway to public denunciations of ASA as violating “academic freedom,” thereby committing a double disservice of misinforming the public as they simultaneously riled up the wingnuts.

The Witch-hunt

Most recently there has appeared an appalling petition on line endorsed by several New Left radicals that claims to be in defense of academic freedom, yet requires signers to link ASA to the reactionary blacklists.⁶⁸ This divisive demand for a political purging as a condition for legitimacy is an echo of the notorious “non-Communist affidavits” introduced by the Taft-Hartley Act of 1947, which helped destroy the labor movement.⁶⁹ Even the recent New York Times editorial criticizing the Right-wing backlash against ASA did not equate the resolution with a threat to academic freedom, and was scrupulous about emphasizing that the ASA “boycott does not apply to individual Israeli scholars engaged in ordinary exchanges.”⁷⁰

I know that many well-intentioned people sign these things simply because they trust the originators or other signers, but we may be watching a rerun of all-too-familiar scenes from the life of the U.S. Left, when a now-successful generation, some of whom are embittered for having lost a political following among new rebels, turns against and pillories its younger selves while in denial of what is actually occurring.

Righteous rationales of the “academic freedom” variety are always available. The current crisis in higher education, especially the cutting of funds from the humanities and a retreat into privatization,

may have also shaped the way this debate has taken place. Deradicalization rarely appears with horns, cloven hooves, and a forked tail. During the 1950s, establishment liberals and ex-radicals admirably opposed the government interventions of the House Committee on Un-American Activities and Joseph McCarthy, but thought that academic freedom should be preserved by purging suspected Communists (labeled “conspirators” to distinguish them from “heretics”) through university committees, a strategy to which AAUP mostly capitulated.⁷¹

Once again, in the 1960s when students rose up out of apathy to seize buildings to make what were perceived to be unreasonable demands at Berkeley, Harvard, Columbi, and elsewhere, another cohort of one-time liberals and socialists denounced them piously for violating academic freedom.⁷²

Since December 2013, the heedless actions of the current ASA-bashers have sown the wind, and we are all now reaping the whirlwind. One hopes that, in contrast, the ASA leaders will learn from the bad behavior of their detractors and develop their own campaign for academic freedom that allows individuals of different points of view on the resolution to unite on a common project; one preserving our professional association as a vital, diverse and self-determining organization that can freely take positions (and freely modify them if the membership so chooses).

A scholarly society is not an armed camp; trust, civility and openness should be the outlook of those at the helm, a desire for the ASA to show what academic freedom for all really looks like. True, there may be some members who use the academic freedom argument to mask the retrograde politics of bigotry, but who can really read the hearts of others?

In the meantime, readers of this essay can themselves take a step toward defending the rights of ASA by signing the Indiana/Purdue petition [6] that allows both supporters and opponents of the resolution, as well as those in between, to preserve the academic rights of an organization that took an audacious step in the bold traditions of internationalist solidarity.

Alan Wald

February 5, 2014

Footnotes:

- 1 http://www.nytimes.com/2013/12/17/education/scholars-group-endorses-an-academic-boycott-of-israel.html?_r=0.
- 2 <http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/answer-sheet/wp/2013/12/16/u-s-academic-group-votes-to-boycott-israeli-universities>.
- 3 Information on a number of the legal actions can be found at: <http://thefutureofamericanstudies.wordpress.com>.
- 4 On the other hand, there are reports of new affiliations, such as American Studies at UC Riverside and UC Davis, so the actual net-loss may not be significant. E-mail from Alex Lubin to Wald, January 30, 2014.
- 5 <http://freebeacon.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/01/ASA-Israel-Boycott-Letter.pdf>.
- 6 <http://bdsloveletters.com>. A characteristic example of revilement of Jewish-American supporter of the resolution can be seen in the comments responding to the guest column of Eric Cheyfitz of Cornell University in the Forward: <http://blogs.forward.com/forward-thinking/189409/why-i-support-the-academic-boycott-of-israel>.
- 7 <http://academeblog.org/2014/01/03/the-asa-and-academic-boycotts>.
- 8 <http://chronicle.com/article/Backlash-Against-Israel/143757>.
- 9

<http://www.newrepublic.com/article/115911/universities-boycotting-israel-overshadow-more-worthy-campus-activism>.

10 <http://hnn.us/article/154428>.

11 Vishay Prashad, however, argues that the vote is much more powerful in its implications:

http://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/understanding-the-boycott-of-israels-universities/2014/01/24/ecbc1064-7f05-11e3-93c1-0e888170b723_story.html.

12 http://www.theasa.net/american_studies_association_resolution_on_academic_boycott_of_israel.

13 This is the title of an essay that appeared in New Left Review, November-December 2000:

<http://newleftreview.org/II/6/edward-said-america-s-last-taboo>.

14 For the BDS website see: <http://www.bdsmovement.net>.

15 Further evidence of the impact of BDS is reported in this article on the Common Dreams website:

<http://www.commondreams.org/headline/2014/02/03-0>.

16

<http://www.insidehighered.com/news/2013/04/24/asian-american-studies-association-endorses-boycott-israeli-universities>.

17 <http://naisa.org/node/719>.

18 <https://chronicle.com/article/MLA-Delegates-Approve/143985>.

19 <http://www.bdsmovement.net>.

20

http://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/understanding-the-boycott-of-israels-universities/2014/01/24/ecbc1064-7f05-11e3-93c1-0e888170b723_story.html.

21 See "Why Israel Fears the Boycott":

http://www.nytimes.com/2014/02/01/opinion/sunday/why-the-boycott-movement-scares-israel.html?_r=0. For the official website of PACBI, see: <http://www.pacbi.org>

22 See for example: Solidarity, "Behind the Palestine/Israeli Crisis," Bashir Abu-Manneh, "The Lessons of Gaza," Rahim Kurwa, "BDS Campaign Sweeps UC Campuses," and David Finkel, "Ariel Sharon, Rot in Peace".

23 See: Bill Mullen, <http://socialistworker.org/2014/01/06/academic-freedom-and-the-asa-boycott>;

Robin D. G. Kelley, <http://mondoweiss.net/2014/01/defending-zionism-academic.html>; David Palumbo-Liu,

<http://america.aljazeera.com/opinions/2013/12/asa-boycott-bds-israelipalestiniansuniversities.html>;

Alex Lubin, <http://www.thenation.com/article/177587/why-im-voting-boycott-israel#>.

24 <http://academic-access.weebly.com>.

25 <http://thetriangle.org/op-ed/asa-and-anti-semitism>. The claims that the resolution is "anti-Semitic," especially by singling out Israel (as opposed to meaner places in the Middle East or around the world), have been well-answered—even by those opposed to the boycott for other reasons. See, for example, Michael Berubé:

<http://america.aljazeera.com/opinions/2014/1/boycott-asa-israelbds.html>. Likewise, the charge that the vote is really "part of a long-term effort to delegitimize the state of Israel...to remove any sense of moral authority or reason to exist for the state of Israel," as claimed by AAUP spokesperson Cary Nelson on NPR, was answered by Eric Cheyfitz:

http://www.democracynow.org/2013/12/18/debate_is_academic_groups_boycott_of.

26

<http://www.adl.org/israel-international/israel-middle-east/content/backgroundersarticles/american-university-officials-institutions-respond-to-asa-boycott.html>.

27

<http://www.adl.org/israel-international/israel-middle-east/content/backgroundersarticles/american-university-officials-institutions-respond-to-asa-boycott.html>.

28 See the full text of the AAUP Statement of Principles on Academic Freedom and Tenure:

<http://www.aaup.org/report/1940-statement-principles-academic-freedom-and-tenure>.

29 See my essay, "Ornery Professors and Academic Freedom," book review of Majorie Heins, *Priests*

of Our Democracy, Society for U.S. Intellectual History Blog, August 2013:

<http://s-usih.org/2013/08/orner-professors-and-academic-freedom.html>.

30 These and other instances are summarized on http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Academic_freedom.

31 For the charge by San Francisco State College faculty that their academic freedom was being destroyed by striking students, see: <http://www.library.sfsu.edu/exhibits/strike/case7-text.html>

32 <http://www.thecrimson.com/article/1974/4/15/the-faculty-and-the-strike-pdbburing>.

33 <http://www.thecrimson.com/article/1969/3/4/support-black-students-pto-the-editors>.

34 <http://www.nyu.edu/about/news-publications/news/2013/12/20/letter-from-nyu-president-john-sexton-and-provost-david-mclaughl.html>.

35 <http://coreyrobin.com/2013/12/28/academic-freedom-according-to-john-sexton>. Another example is Brandeis University, which terminated its longstanding relation with a Palestinian university: <http://coreyrobin.com/2013/12/18/when-it-comes-to-the-boycott-of-israel-who-has-the-real-double-standard>.

36 The five-word quotation attributed to Marez when asked about the choice of Israel, "one has to start somewhere," appeared in http://www.nytimes.com/2013/12/16/us/scholars-group-to-disclose-result-of-vote-on-an-academic-boycott-of-israel.html?_r=1&. The actual Times statement continues: "He argued that the United States has 'a particular responsibility to answer the call for boycott because it is the largest supplier of military aid to the state of Israel.' While acknowledging that the same could be said of a number of oppressive governments, past and present, he said that in those countries, civil society groups had not asked his association for a boycott, as Palestinian groups have." Marez reported about the refusal to publish his op eds in an e-mail from Marez to Wald, 14 January 2014.

37 <http://www.prestsv.com/detail/2013/11/02/332594/us-to-boost-israel-aid-by-half-billion>. Human rights groups and our own State Department have provided ample documentation of allegations of Israel's human rights violations, including torture, home demolitions, extrajudicial killings, detentions without trial, excessive force, use of human shields, and deliberate attacks on civilian persons and facilities. More than 50 Israeli laws either privilege Jews or discriminate against Palestinians, according to Adalah, the Legal Center for Arab Minority Rights in Israel. See: http://articles.chicagotribune.com/2014-01-30/opinion/ct-academic-boycott-of-israel-oped-0130-2014-0130_1_academic-boycott-double-standard-israeli-academic-institution.

38 See <http://coreyrobin.com/2013/12/23/does-the-asa-boycott-violate-academic-freedom-a-roundtable>.

Unfortunately, I have not been able to locate a source where Siva Vaidhyanathan elaborates his full analysis, although he has frequently tweeted short statements denouncing the resolution.

39 The first version of the ASA Resolution can be found at:

<http://www.change.org/petitions/members-of-the-asa-support-resolution-to-boycott-israeli-academic-institutions>.

40 <http://chronicle.com/article/Membership-of-American-Studies/143645>.

41 http://www.theasa.net/about/resolution_on_the_iraq_war_20061.

42 <http://coreyrobin.com/2013/12/23/does-the-asa-boycott-violate-academic-freedom-a-roundtable>.

43 <https://www.jacobinmag.com/2013/04/against-the-law>.

44 <http://www.insidehighered.com/news/2014/01/14/mesas-committee-academic-freedom-has-rejected-boycotts-while-condemning-abuses>.

45 <http://yaledailynews.com/blog/2014/01/15/salovey-condemns-academic-boycott-of-israel>.

46 <http://america.aljazeera.com/opinions/2014/1/boycott-asa-israelbds.html>.

47 Ibid.

48 Useful observations about other efforts were made by Joel Beinin in Chapter 8, Audrea Lim, ed., The Case for Sanctions Against Israel (London: Verso, 2102); Moshe Machover:

<http://www.marxists.org/history/etol/writers/machover/2005/xx/boycott.html>; Noam Chomsky:

<http://electronicintifada.net/content/chomsky-gaza-academic-boycott-will-strengthen-support-israel/11795>.

49 For the U.S. antiwar movement, see Fred Halstead, *Out Now: A Participant's Account of the Movement in the U.S. Against the Vietnam War* (New York: Pathfinder, 1971) and Peter Camejo, *Liberalism, Ultraleftism or Mass Action* (New York: Merit, 1970). The resemblances between the Palestinian and South African situations are strong and compelling, especially in the occupied territories, as Nelson Mandela and Bishop Tutu observed. But to what degree is the educational system in Israel similar to that of Apartheid South Africa? David Lloyd, a BDS spokesperson, makes the following point: "The Israeli system of dispossession and discrimination is not South African apartheid, but it is nonetheless one in which separate rights, privileges and laws are accorded to one section of the population and denied to others on the basis of ethnicity and religions." See: <http://www.aaup.org/sites/default/files/files/JAF/2013%20JAF/Responses/Response-Lloyd.pdf> .

50 <http://chronicle.com/article/Boycott-Debate-Is-Symptom-of/144183/?key=S2MhIgU6MiAXNC5mYjlCaJtSYSA%2FN00kZHFLPnJ6blIVEQ%3D%3D>.

51 http://www.theasa.net/caucus_activism/item/a_time_to_break_the_silence/.

52 See the comments at the end of http://www.theasa.net/caucus_activism/item/a_time_to_break_the_silence.

53 Personal disclosure: I supported the resolution with criticism, but ultimately abstained in the vote due to these kinds of concerns. My hope was that more time would produce a more effective approach, an improved atmosphere, and a strategy to both defend ASA and to preserve it as a united if diverse organization after the sure-to-be-controversial decision (if pro-boycott) was announced. I also see a difference between a professional organization, which must preserve space for a wide range of views if scholarly exchange is to be real, and a political group or solidarity movement, which unites people on narrower grounds.

54 Alex Lubin's recollection is that the original academic boycott was formulated as one for human rights. E-mail from Lubin to Wald, January 30, 2104.

55 <http://www.haaretz.com/culture/arts-leisure/.premium-1.570977>. But I wouldn't rule out Seeger's agreeing with the ASA resolution if he had a chance to read the full text and discuss it.

56 BDS spokesperson Omar Barghouti is admirably candid about there being "gray areas," as in: <http://electronicintifada.net/content/academic-boycott-and-israeli-left/5550>.

57 <http://www.dartblog.com/data/2013/12/011222.p>.

58 <http://www.emorywheel.com/emory-opposes-israel-boycott>.

59 <http://www.amchainitiative.org/academic-boycott-of-israel-map>.

60 <http://blog.timesunion.com/capitol/archives/204570/senate-passes-kleins-dont-boycott-israel-bill>.

61 <http://dovhikind.blogspot.com/2013/12/klein-hikind-announce-new-legislation.html>.

62 Ibid.

63 <http://nypost.com/2014/01/03/ny-lawmakers-jump-into-academias-anti-israel-affairs>.

64 <http://news.iu.edu/releases/iu/2013/12/israeli-academic-boycott-statement.shtml>. There are indications that President Robbie is modifying his position in light of protests.

65 <http://electronicintifada.net/blogs/benjamin-doherty/former-harvard-president-larry-summers-calls-boycott-asa>. I am indebted to the blogging of John K. Wilson in the AAUP website for this and some of the above references: <http://academeblog.org/?s=boycott&submit=Search>.

66 <http://coreyrobin.com/tag/academic-boycott>.

67 <http://academeblog.org/2014/01/03/the-asa-and-academic-boycotts>.

68 <http://www.gopetition.com/petitions/support-academic-freedom-in-and-on-israelpalestine.html>.

69 The affidavits were declared unconstitutional in 1965.

70 <http://www.nytimes.com/2014/02/04/opinion/a-chill-on-speech.html>. This is not to suggest that the New York Times supports the resolution.

71 See Michael Harrington's 1954 critique of Sidney Hook's Heresy, Yes — Conspiracy, No:

<http://www.marxists.org/history/etol/newspape/anvil/11-v6n01-w11-summer-fall-1954-anvil.pdf>.

72 See the description of the attacks on student radicals at Berkeley by former Leftists Nathan Glazer, Lewis Feuer et al. in Howard Brick, *Age of Contradiction: American Culture and Thought in the 1960s* (New York: Tywane, 1998), 176

P.S.

* <http://www.solidarity-us.org/site/node/4094>

* Alan Wald, an editor of *Against the Current*, has been a member of the American Studies Association (ASA) since 1988. He was an elected member of the ASA National Council from 1993 to 1996, Director of the Program in American Culture at the University of Michigan from 2000-2003, and winner of the ASA's Mary C. Turpie Award for mentoring, teaching, and program building in 2012, for which he received lifetime membership in ASA. He is appreciative of comments on a draft of this essay from the editors of ATC, Ben Balthaser, Howard Brick, Angela Dillard, and Alex Lubin.

Footnotes

[1] See on ESSF (article 26930), [USA/Israel: A BDS Movement That Works](#).

[2] <http://solidarity-us.org/pdfs/ATC%20165--BDS.pdf>

[3] <http://www.theasa.net>

[4] <http://www.usacbi.org/mission-statement/>

[5] <https://www.jacobinmag.com/2013/04/against-the-law/>

[6] http://www.ipetitions.com/petition/indiana-university-and-purdue-presidents-michael?utm_medium=email&utm_source=system&utm_campaign=Send%2Bto%2BFriend