

## Chapter 10

# Academic Freedom and Academic Boycotts

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Academic freedom is an important right and one worth struggling for. The degree to which it exists in any society is often a barometer of the extent to which other freedoms are allowed to thrive. Universities have a particular role to play in defending academic freedom and not only because of the importance of this principle in supporting teaching and research: advancing the space for free thought within universities can widen the space for free expression in society as a whole. And as we are making comparisons in this debate between Israel and South Africa, it is worth recalling that under apartheid, white liberal university administrations (themselves pressured by students and faculty) sought university autonomy from the state. In the process, these universities became spaces in which antiapartheid activists were relatively more able to organize and mobilize. Ultimately, however, the dependence of these universities on state funding limited the extent to which even the liberal universities were able to allow open access to all. For most of the twentieth century, Black students entered those universities as little more than tokens of liberalism.

Context matters. In societies deeply divided by conflict, such as South Africa during the era of apartheid, the abstract idea of universities as open and autonomous constantly comes up against the constraints of unfree-dom. When access to education is fundamentally limited by restrictions on movement, by conditions of public violence against some categories of persons, and by proscriptions on free association whether in private relationships or political affiliation, academic freedom on its own is a difficult value to sustain. Moreover, in such conditions, elevating it above other rights and freedoms could be seen as an elitist luxury. Those of us committed to justice need to consider what ends we are serving in defending this ideal at all costs under conditions of repression. To be sure, more academic freedom is always better than less. But placing this goal above all others may have unintended consequences. In South Africa, the apartheid state insisted that there was academic freedom for Black people in the “Black” universities. It pointed to “separate but equal” facilities for Black students and argued that the state operated within the framework of the law. This was patently false, of course, and academic boycotts (and, to a much greater extent, sports boycotts) were very important weapons in exposing the falsehood of these claims.

Many arguments against academic boycotts have, in my view, both overstated the impact of academic boycotts on academic freedom (particularly on the flow of ideas in an age of social media) and simply failed to address the conditions in which Palestinian scholars work. In effect, they end up focusing on the adverse effects for some Israeli academics while ignoring

the daily realities of conditions of work (and life) for Palestinians students and faculty. They avoid the challenge of building a stronger, justice oriented discourse on the Israel/Palestine issue—one that would indeed benefit from the engagement of intellectuals concerned with freedom. The unqualified defense of academic freedom, and the rejection of any tactic that might be understood as curtailing the full (but for some rather than all) expression of this freedom, constrains the possibility of collective action by the academic profession in contexts where other freedoms are violated on a daily basis.

If we were to put aside, for the moment, debates on the perfect conditions for adopting principles, reading the academic boycott as a political tactic introduces a set of considerations: What does this tactic seek to achieve, within what array of tactics is it based, and how effective is it likely to be? In making these judgments, careful attention needs to be paid to the debates and voices from within the society in which change is being sought. This is not because the voices “from below” or “from within” are necessarily always correct, but because they may have the best strategic understanding of the costs and benefits of different tactics. There are indeed strong voices within Israel calling for an academic boycott, and they are supported by a large cohort of Palestinian academics in the region and in exile. That is not so different from the situation under apartheid, when the call for a boycott was strongly supported by major academic staff associations. Although many liberals did oppose the academic boycott, by the late 1980s they were very much in the minority, in large part because the notion of academic autonomy could not be sustained as state repression intensified.

As I understand it, the call for a selective academic boycott seeks to isolate the Israeli state as part of a strategy of sanctions and divestment. It calls on Israeli academics to take a public stand against the occupation and against the violation of the human rights of Palestinians. It is a nonviolent strategy and, on these grounds, has considerable merit in a situation in which violence on both sides has escalated to frightening proportions. Any strategy that offers alternatives to suicide bombings and targeted assassinations, to daily abuse and bombings, needs at the very least to be taken very seriously. How effective would it be? This would depend on a number of factors, including whether or not Israeli academics as individuals and especially as members of their professional associations are moved to examine the nature of their relationship to the state and its policies.

Also important is whether there is sufficient international solidarity for a boycott to effectively pressure Israeli academic institutions. It is noteworthy that, in the absence of an academic boycott, no Israeli university administration or professional association has to date protested against the treatment of Palestinian academics and students. Ultimately, the effectiveness of a boycott depends on whether the Israeli state itself feels pressure and thus engages more actively in advancing a political solution. Whether or not this is likely to happen requires a deeper knowledge of the Israeli situation than I have. These are issues to be engaged, not to be pushed off the table by a principled, liberal-absolutist opposition to academic boycotts.

The references to South Africa in many arguments for and against the boycott invite some comment from the South African academics participating in the debate. Was the boycott successful in South Africa? Of course there were some costs. Gatekeepers did emerge (but as

frequently as not were challenged); some academics who actively opposed apartheid had invitations to international conferences withdrawn; it was not always possible to target the supporters of the apartheid regime; and South African academics' understanding of global issues was certainly weakened. It is the nature of such weapons to be double-edged. But, as part of a battery of sanctions, the academic boycott undoubtedly had an impact on both the apartheid state and on white academics and university administrations. The boycott, together with the more successful sports boycott and economic divestment campaigns, helped to strengthen the struggle of Black people for justice.

The Afrikaner elite, very proud of its European roots and of the legacy of Jan Smuts as a global representative in the postwar system, and convinced that there would be support for its policies abroad, was rudely shaken. University administrations could no longer hide behind an excuse of neutrality, but had to issue statements on their opposition to apartheid and introduce programs of redress. Academic associations (some more than others) examined the nature and conditions of research in their disciplines and faculty unions became part of broader struggles for justice rather than bodies protecting narrow professional interests. Universities became sites of intense debate, and, indeed, intellectuals became critically involved in debates about the nature of current and future South African societies.

Would the BDS strategy succeed in advancing justice in Israel/Palestine? That is not a question that is easily settled. As an academic and a social justice activist, however, it is an ethical choice that appears to me increasingly urgent.

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*Ed. Note: This piece was originally written for a 2006 conference organized by the American Association of University Professors that was canceled due to pro-Israel action by influential donors. The full discussion can be found at [www.aaup.org/file/Papers-From-A-Planned-Conference-on-Boycotts.pdf](http://www.aaup.org/file/Papers-From-A-Planned-Conference-on-Boycotts.pdf).*