

REFLECTIONS ON ACADEMIC BOYCOTTS IN THE WAKE OF THE UJ-BGU CAMPAIGN

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INTRODUCTION

The past few years have seen an increase in calls for a boycott of Israeli academic institutions. This is part of a broader campaign to apply pressure on the Israeli state and its agencies. A recent initiative to suspend relations between the University of Johannesburg (UJ) and Ben-Gurion University (BGU) in Israel received much media attention in South Africa and gave rise to controversy. In particular, three objections were raised:

1. The call for boycott poses a threat to academic freedom by curbing the free exchange of ideas and by penalising people for their opinions;
2. The boycott is a discriminatory form of political intervention, because it singles out a specific group of academics – defined by nationality or citizenship – for special treatment;
3. It is a vengeful and punitive measure that blocks dialogue and prevents a move towards conflict resolution.

In what follows, I discuss each of these points in turn. This is done *not* in order to set down the one ‘correct’ position, but to encourage reflection and debate regarding the issue. Before proceeding, we must recognise that there is no politically neutral language that can be used to address the matters at hand. Pretending otherwise would lead to a ‘dialogue of the deaf’, rather than to a meaningful exchange. The discussion below is based thus on three explicit political assumptions:

1. The framework for resolving the Israeli–Palestinian conflict is international law. It is not an internal affair to be decided by Israelis alone, but a global human rights issue of concern to many actors;
2. Principles of justice and redress, individual and collective equality, and inclusive democracy, are central to a resolution of the conflict;

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3. The main problem is the Israeli state's denial of human and political rights to Palestinians. A change in Israeli practices therefore is essential for any move towards reconciliation.

This is not to deny that there are other historical and contextual factors that need to be considered in order to acquire a thorough understanding of the conflict. However, without an agreement on the three core points noted above, any debate on the academic boycott would lead nowhere (these core points themselves may be debated, of course, but in a separate forum).

BOYCOTT AS A STRATEGY

On this basis, then, the question facing all those concerned with human rights and justice is what can be done to facilitate a positive change in Israeli practices. In other words, a change that would involve adopting principles of justice and equality, granting the same rights to all citizens regardless of ethnic and religious affiliation, terminating the occupation of the 1967 territories and recognising the rights of refugees displaced as a result of the creation of the State of Israel in 1948.

Ideally, change would be driven from the inside by Israelis, as a result of realising that no stable and secure existence for Israeli Jews can be based on the oppression and denial of rights to Palestinians. However, it is rarely the case that those who enjoy political and economic privileges give them up voluntarily, without some form of pressure. This is especially the case when the subordinate group – Palestinian Arabs – lacks substantial leverage to be used in order to overturn the system from within. Black South Africans used their crucial role as labourers in the system of production as a strategic weapon in the anti-apartheid liberation struggle. Palestinians, by contrast, reside outside the boundaries of the Israeli system of control (if they are refugees), are excluded from the system of production (if they live under occupation), and are subject to marginalisation as a permanent minority (if they live within Israel 'proper'). It is difficult to envisage a change in their conditions without international solidarity.

The internal anti-apartheid movement benefited from international solidarity efforts, such as sanctions and divestment campaigns, and sports, culture and academic boycotts. The precise contribution of each of these components to the demise of apartheid is impossible to quantify. No one has identified what *specifically* was achieved by the academic boycott, for example, as distinct from other aspects of the anti-apartheid campaign. But, there is broad agreement that it played a role in undermining the sense of complacency of an important section of the white population. Whether that forced it into action for change, or rather pushed it to disengage and abandon the country altogether, is a matter of ongoing dispute.

What is not in dispute is that the academic boycott – as applied in apartheid South Africa – is the inspiration for the current campaign targeting Israeli academic institutions. Thus, the Palestinian Campaign for the Academic and Cultural Boycott of

Israel (PACBI) frequently invokes South Africa, in order to provide legitimacy for itself (since no one ever disputed the moral imperative of the anti-apartheid struggle), and as an example of a successful strategy that worked ‘there’ and therefore could be expected to work ‘here’. This is strengthened by the notion that Israel has a ‘system of apartheid’, in addition to its practices of occupation and colonisation (see the 2004 call for boycott at <http://pacbi.org/etemplate.php?id-869>).

The call to sever relations between UJ and BGU uses a somewhat different angle. It speaks in the name of academics in South Africa, ‘a country with a history of brute racism on the one hand and both academic acquiescence and resistance to it on the other’. South Africans, it argues, ‘are under an obligation to revisit relationships forged during the apartheid era with other institutions that turned a blind eye to racial oppression in the name of “purely scholarly” or “scientific work”’. It goes on to claim that Israeli universities are complicit in the occupation of Palestinian territories, in the oppression of Palestinians and discrimination against Palestinian citizens. The relationship with BGU must therefore be suspended, until ‘the state of Israel adheres to international law and BGU (as did some South African universities during the struggle against South African apartheid) openly declares itself against the occupation and withdraws all privileges for the soldiers who enforce it’ (<http://www.ujpetition.com/2010/09/south-african-academics-support-call.html>, September 2010).

In their different ways, these calls present us with a set of issues related both to the characterisation of the Israeli system as apartheid and the ways in which strategies used in the South African struggle could be adopted for the struggle against Israeli oppressive practices. These are distinct issues: the Israeli system of control may resemble apartheid in certain important respects, but that tells us very little about the effective and legitimate ways of challenging it (see discussion in the *Johannesburg Salon*, http://jwtc.org.za/resources/docs/salon-volume-3/RanGreenstein_Israel.pdf). Each political system presents a different configuration of forces in a different historical context, and therefore calls for unique strategies of protest and resistance. Having said that, the question of the academic boycott does raise some similar issues of concern, of a more general nature.

ACADEMIC FREEDOM

Let us address academic freedom first. Is it indeed the case that boycotts pose a threat to academic freedom and interfere with the free flow of ideas and debates?

Looked at in abstract terms, the answer may seem to be ‘yes’. The introduction of non-academic considerations is of necessity a limitation on the uninterrupted course of academic life. Some evidence exists that the campaign against apartheid made it more difficult for white South Africans (regardless of their personal views and record of activism) to compete freely in the ‘marketplace of ideas’. This, despite the fact that no international journal or academic association adopted a policy of excluding anyone from publishing papers, presenting at conferences, attending seminars, finding sabbatical posts, and generally taking part in global scholarly exchanges. Occasional restrictions

were imposed on individual South African academics overseas, but it was usually at the initiative of local activists, frequently students, rather than a response to a coherent strategy (see anecdotes in *Academe*, 92(5) September–October 2006: www.aaup.org/AAUP/pubsres/academe/2066/SO/).

It must be pointed out that activists campaigning for a boycott of Israeli institutions are generally careful not to support such exclusions, except perhaps in a few cases of notorious individuals who use their academic position to advocate and plan racist policies (taking part in demographic engineering processes to ensure Jewish numerical dominance in Israel or devising legal strategies to allow the Israeli military to commit crimes and escape international censure). In such cases, the boundaries between freedom of speech (which must be protected) and freedom of action (which must be curtailed if it involves acts of discrimination and human rights violations) are not always clear.

Beyond such possible exceptions there is no indication that the academic freedom of staff members at Israeli academic institutions is being violated in practice, or even potentially, as a result of the boycott campaign. The UJ petition is explicit about the focus on institutional relations, and expresses no objections to reading and assigning material produced by BGU academics, engaging them in debate, publishing their contributions, participating in conferences alongside them, and so on – all subject to the normal rules of academic exchange. In a similar manner, the PACBI campaign focuses explicitly on institutions, and does not envisage or call for any step that would violate the right of individual academics to engage in free debate and exchanges of views, opinions or analyses.

An academic boycott may indeed affect individual scholars to the extent that they represent their institution in public or submit requests for funding through the institution and in its name. But, entitlement to research funds from overseas sources (such as the EU) is not generally recognised as a universal right, nor is it part of the normal definition of academic freedom. True, it is not always easy to tell the difference between an individual acting in his/her own capacity, and as a member of an institution. But, for most practical purposes it should not be difficult to separate the two functions. How, then, can the campaign distinguish between individual and institutional targets?

To answer that, we need to identify the overall goal behind the campaign: to convey the sense that things cannot proceed as usual, that there can be no normal academic life in an abnormal society that practises systematic ethnic exclusion. At the same time, there is a need to maintain a dialogue with critical voices operating from within Israeli and Palestinian societies, and make a contribution to change. This cannot be achieved by abstention from contact and maintaining ‘purity’ in isolation. Here are a few suggestions, aimed to clarify the distinction and also serve as a possible guide for action: Do not attend conferences in Israel that do not explicitly address issues of rights and justice; link up with internal dissident forces and work with them to undermine discriminatory and abusive practices; boycott any academic project that has military links; do not teach or otherwise participate in specialised academic programmes that cater to members

of the security/military apparatuses; campaign against any international funding for academic programmes that do not have explicit progressive content aiming to enhance equality and justice (this would include ‘neutral’ or ‘value-free’ research); condition any cooperation by insisting that the institution subscribe to something along the lines of the Sullivan Code, which was used under apartheid in South Africa to enforce a minimum code of acceptable practice.

SINGLING OUT ISRAEL?

The steps suggested above may be suitable in other contexts as well – why reserve them for Israel? We need to realise that since the demise of apartheid, governments and multilateral organisations have imposed sanctions on many countries including Serbia, North Korea, Iraq, Iran, Sudan, Zimbabwe, Burma and others. Israel clearly is *not* singled out for international censure (in fact, it receives preferential treatment due to unconditional US diplomatic and financial support), but we do need to understand what makes it distinct in the eyes of global civil society activists. It is not the only or worst offender that violates human rights and engages in oppressive practices. Other states in the Middle East and elsewhere are guilty of similar practices. It is not the only state born out of a colonial-type encounter, which resulted in the dispossession of indigenous people. Most states in the ‘New World’ owe their origins to a violent takeover of territory and resources by European settlers.

What is indeed unique about Israel, making it similar to apartheid South Africa, is the continuous re-enactment of the original acts of dispossession on a daily basis. The ethnic exclusion which accompanied the emergence of Israel in 1948 is an ongoing process – in fact, it is the central project that has driven Israeli policies from their inception. Recent years have seen dozens of new acts, regulations, pieces of legislation and government policies that aim to entrench ethnic inequalities, bolster Israel’s Jewish nature at the expense of indigenous Arabs, and restrict the political, social (and – where possible – physical) presence of Palestinians. They make Israel a ‘Jewish demographic state’ – an exclusionary state of a special type. It is not the solidarity movement that ‘singles out’ Israel. Israel singles itself out by such practices, which are without parallel today. To be clear, the term ‘Israel’ here recognises that the meaningful unit of analysis is ‘Greater Israel’ – which has included the occupied territories for the last 44 years – and ‘Greater Palestine’, with the excluded 1948 refugees as an essential part of the picture – rather than pre-1967 Israel which no longer exists.

There is one crucial historical difference between Israel and apartheid South Africa, however. The overall goal of political exclusion and segregation in South Africa was to entrench white prosperity. Central to this was the exploitation of black labour. Black people were ever-present on the streets, in white-dominated workplaces, mines, factories, farms, and homes, even if they were politically subordinated and socially marginalised. Israel is different in this respect due to the success of the strategy of externalising Palestinians. This has been the case since the early days of settlement: from

the campaign for ‘Jewish labour’ before 1948 and the ethnic cleansing of 1948, through the suspension of 1967 occupied territories in an eternal limbo of non-annexation and non-liberation, all the way to the post-Oslo disengagement plans that leave Palestine inside the boundaries of Israeli control while Palestinians remain outside the boundaries of citizenship and rights.

While the occupation is still paramount in the daily lives of Palestinians, it has become invisible to the majority of Israelis, who choose not to see it or feel its presence in their lives. They profess not to understand what they have to do with the conditions of people living in ‘foreign’ territories. In this sense, Israeli Jews are different from white South Africans, who could not avoid the reality of apartheid, and for whom the relationship between ‘crime’ and ‘punishment’ (in the form of sanctions) was fairly obvious. How can this relationship be made similarly visible to Israeli citizens?

SOLIDARITY AND EDUCATION, NOT PUNISHMENT

Israeli Jews, and particularly their business and educational elites, feel an integral part of the West. Academics regard themselves as part of the global academic community. This feeling is central to their professional identity and it contributes to a prevalent sense of complacency. While they are not particularly progressive or reactionary as a group, and are not different from other academics, they do work under unique conditions. This is the key challenge then: how to use the quest for normality and legitimacy to encourage ordinary people to move against extraordinary circumstances?

The rationale for the academic boycott in the case of Israel is that it targets a crucial component of the identity of dominant elites who tolerate, though not necessarily actively facilitate, oppressive practices. This campaign may be undertaken in order to make them realise that they cannot continue with life as usual, that they must act to change the situation if they wish to avoid being ostracised. This approach would not necessarily work when targeting other oppressive regimes with different historical legacies (which is why there was a focus on rugby and cricket boycotts in apartheid South Africa, wine in Pinochet’s Chile, football under the military junta’s rule in Argentina, and so on).

To be effective, the campaign would need to observe some guidelines. First, it should target institutions for specific practices for which they bear responsibility, rather than for general practices in which they are not directly involved. Second, the targets should be realistic: those affected should have the power to change the practices in question. Third, the identification of targets and nature of sanctions would ideally be done in cooperation between local and global academic activists.

At all major Israeli universities dissident academics and progressive student groups, which advocate equality and justice for all, are found. They are based internally and can identify the specific issues facing each institution. These may range from discrimination in residences, biased and offensive study materials, the presence of security-military academic programmes and institutions, the role played by security forces within the university, censorship, and so on. International solidarity organisations and academic

activists need to establish links with local Jewish and Arab activists, work together with them to identify concrete concerns at different institutions, and campaign on that basis.

What are the advantages of this approach? It would come from within, but with external assistance and participation; it would lead to forging international links of solidarity and activism; it would avoid the charge of being a punitive external imposition, which engenders resistance to change. Most importantly, it would give people specific targets on which they could work as an educational and mobilising tool. The campaign can succeed because it is within the power of institutions to change their practices. For example, the demand raised in the UJ petition that BGU terminate special programmes to members of the security forces and denounce the occupation can be met by the institution if it chooses to, with no external actors involved.

This strategy requires regular exchange of information between academics. Israel-based progressive activists and academics, working for equality, justice and human rights, are subject to enormous pressure internally. The only way they could sustain a campaign to change society from within is by maintaining a constant exchange of information, solidarity, and a flow of moral support from the outside. Palestinian activists are even more in need of external exchange and assistance. It is only in dialogue between relevant actors that the campaign can move forward. The UJ-BGU campaign provides a useful starting point for future efforts, which hopefully would see greater involvement of South African academics in struggles for global justice.