

Changing My Mind about the Boycott

Joan W. Scott

In 2006, I was one of the organizers of an aborted AAUP conference on academic boycotts. The point was to open a conversation about the utility—past and present—of such political actions, to understand what was actually involved in the choice of that strategy, to conduct a conversation in a setting above the fray (in this instance at the Rockefeller Conference Center in Bellagio, Italy), and to learn what we could from the various points of view we hoped to represent at the conference. Idealistically, we imagined the conference to be an exercise in academic freedom, the fulfillment of the best of AAUP principles. In fact, our experience was anything but the fulfillment of AAUP ideals. From the outset, defenders of right-wing Israeli politics—with Professor Gerald Steinberg of Bar-Ilan University in the lead—sought to prevent the meeting, arguing, in the name of academic freedom, that “illegitimate” (that is, Palestinian) voices would be included in the group. Soon the then-leaders of the AAUP—Cary Nelson and Jane Buck—joined the opposition, notifying the funders of the conference that it did not have official AAUP approval. (They did not notify the conference organizers of these actions.) At that point the conference was canceled. The full story, as well as some of the papers that would have

been presented at the conference, was published in a special report in *Academe* (September–October 2006).

Those of us who organized the conference were not promoting academic boycotts; we were simply interested in debating the issue in order to better understand and evaluate the strategy of the boycott. In fact, at the time, I agreed with the prevailing view at the AAUP that academic boycotts were contrary to principles of open exchange protected by academic freedom. I have now reconsidered that view. Even at the time, in the heat of the controversy about our conference, it began to seem to me that inflexible adherence to a principle did not make sense without consideration of the political contexts within which one wanted to apply it. Indeed, given the vagueness of the principle of academic freedom, its many different uses and applications, knowing how to apply it required understanding the different functions it served in practice. If the conference was meant to achieve that understanding, it was thwarted, for we had clearly walked into a political minefield—the so-called defenders of Israel were going to prevent us from exercising our rights to free speech (to discussion and debate), just as they were preventing their critics within Israel from doing the same by threatening and firing those who represented dissenting views. What did it mean, I wondered, to oppose the boycott campaign in the name of Israeli academic freedom when the Israeli state regularly denied academic freedom to critics of the state, the occupation, or, indeed, of Zionism, and when the blacklisting of the state’s critics is the regular tool of state authorities against Israel’s own academic institutions?

If anything, the power of the Right and the oppression of Palestinians have increased since 2006—even the supposed “weakening” of the Netanyahu government has taken place through the strengthening of right-wing parties. The country that claims to be the only democracy in the Middle East is putting in place a brutal apartheid system; its politicians are talking openly about the irrelevance of Arab Israeli votes in elections and developing new methods for testing Arab Israeli loyalty to the Jewish state. Israel’s legal system rests on the inequality of Jewish and non-Jewish citizens; its children are regularly taught that Arab lives are worth less than Jewish lives; its military interferes with Palestinians’ access to university education, freedom of assembly,

and the right to free speech; and its Council of Higher Education, now an arm of the Likud Party, has elevated a religious college in the settlements to the status of a university, accredited a neoconservative think tank to grant BA degrees to students, and conducted inquisitions among university faculty, seeking to harass, demote, or fire dissidents—that is, to silence their speech. The hypocrisy of those who consider these to be democratic practices needs to be exposed. An academic and cultural boycott seems to me to be the way to do this.

Such a boycott refuses to accept the facade of democracy Israel wants to present to the world. It is not a boycott of individuals on the basis of their national citizenship. Quite the contrary—it is an institutional boycott, aimed at those cultural and educational institutions that consistently fail to oppose the occupation and the unequal treatment of non-Jewish citizens. It demands evidence that these institutions provide academic freedom to Arabs as well as Jews, Palestinians as well as Israelis, within the borders of Israel, the occupied West Bank, and Gaza, and support it for Arabs and Jews equally. It says that, in the face of an apartheid that violates both the principles and practices of equality and freedom for all, a principled opposition to boycotts as punitive or unfair makes no sense. In fact, such an opposition only helps perpetuate the system. The boycott is a strategic way of exposing the unprincipled and undemocratic behavior of Israeli state institutions; its aim might be characterized as “saving Israel from itself.”

The American academy has been particularly complicit in perpetuating the fiction of Israeli democracy—its leaders seek to protect Israel from its critics, even as they also seek to protect themselves from the wrath of the organized lobbies who speak on behalf of the current Israeli regime and its policy of establishing academic outposts in illegal settlements. This, it seems to me, is ill advised, since so much of Israeli politics right now is at odds with the best values of the American educational system. Paradoxically, it is because we believe so strongly in principles of academic freedom that a strategic boycott of the state that so abuses it makes sense right now.

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