

Is an Academic Boycott of Israel Justified?

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Over the past several years those who are opposed to some of the policies of the Israeli government, or even to the existence of the State, have proposed an academic boycott of Israel as one of the weapons in their campaign. In this article I want to consider whether the use of this weapon can be justified. In all moral discourse questions about justification have to be universalisable, so to discuss the question whether an academic boycott of Israel is justified we need to start by considering whether academic boycotts in general can be justified, and if so when and how. I believe that it is possible to show that academic boycotts can be justified only in the most extreme of circumstances, and that these circumstances certainly do not prevail in Israel today.

I am by profession a scientist, and I shall start by considering boycotts of scientists. I do so for two reasons. First, the arguments that can be deployed for and against academic boycotts are clearer in the case of scientists than they are for other academics – although, as we shall see, similar arguments can in fact be made for and against boycotts of other scholars. Secondly, scientists have for centuries taken a view (even if only implicitly) on the question of discriminating against other scientists on the basis of their nationality or their country of residence, and more than 70 years ago the international scientific community issued an explicit statement that rules out boycotts on those grounds. This statement enunciates what is called the principle of the Universality of Science. It was published between the two World Wars, when an organization called the International Council of Scientific Unions (ICSU) was founded as an umbrella group for all the national academies of science in the world (the National Academy of Sciences of the USA, the Royal Society and so on). The broad outlines of the statement of principle have remained intact since that time, although its wording has undergone some changes in the past few decades. A modern formulation by ICSU of the principle of the Universality of Science is this:

The principle of the Universality of Science is fundamental to scientific progress. This principle embodies freedom of movement, association, expression and communication for scientists as well as equitable access to data, information and research materials. In pursuing its objectives in respect

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of the rights and responsibilities of scientists, the ICSU actively upholds this principle, and, in so doing, opposes any discrimination on the basis of such factors as ethnic origin, religion, citizenship, language, political stance, gender or age. [1]

This wording is not as clear or water-tight as one might like: in particular, the phrase ‘such factors as’ is unsatisfactory. But the general intent is, I think, clear enough: that it is wrong to discriminate among scientists by reason of factors that are not relevant to the conduct of the science itself. Among these scientifically irrelevant factors which, according to the principle of the Universality of Science, it is improper to take into account in one’s dealings with scientific colleagues is country of residence, the feature on which recent proposals for a boycott have been based.

The fact that the principle of the Universality of Science was first formulated between the two World Wars is significant. One should not imagine that before that time it was regarded as acceptable among scientists to discriminate on the basis of scientifically irrelevant factors like country of residence. On the contrary, in the early days of the scientific academies like the Royal Society, it was understood without question that people’s contribution to the progress of science had nothing to do with their nationality: science was truly international. But with the rise of nationalism, some scientists claimed the right to exclude others from the community of science on the grounds that those others belonged to hostile nations; and after the end of the First World War some French scientists refused to allow German colleagues access to international conferences. This action was widely condemned by the international community of science, but it suggested that what had up till then been universally accepted as a matter of course now needed to be made explicit, and led to the formulation of the principle of the Universality of Science.

To most working scientists, the principle of the Universality of Science is axiomatic; they don’t spend much time thinking about it or considering the reasons why, as the ICSU statement I quoted just now asserts, it is fundamental to the progress of science. A few years ago, in response to an earlier call for an academic boycott – on that occasion one that was specifically directed against scientists – three Oxford colleagues and I set up a discussion group to examine the principle of the Universality of Science and to tease out its theoretical basis. We published the results of our discussions [2] in the journal *Nature* in January 2003, and as I still think our conclusions were on the right lines I shall summarise them here. The

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main feature of our paper was to give three reasons why boycotting scientists by reason of their country of residence should not be permitted.

- 1) The advance of science is potentially of net benefit to all mankind, and therefore avoidable obstacles to its pursuit are undesirable.
- 2) Since the value of a given contribution to science ought to be judged on its own merits rather than on the basis of any characteristics of the person making the contribution, the exclusion of a particular group of people from the scientific enterprise for reasons that are irrelevant to the science itself is a perversion of the objectivity that science demands.
- 3) With humankind dangerously divided by race, citizenship, religion and so on, the continued ability of scientists to cooperate in a way that transcends these boundaries is an important symbol of, and impetus to, the breakdown of such divisions.

Each of these arguments deserves a little expansion. The first of them – that the advance of science is potentially of net benefit to all mankind – is straightforward enough. To the extent that scientific discoveries bring benefits it is of no consequence whether the discoveries are made in the USA, China, Australia or Belgium. A boycott of scientists from any one country will impede the progress of the scientific enterprise and diminish the chances of valuable progress being made.

The second argument – that the exclusion of one group of people from the scientific enterprise damages the objectivity that science demands – rests on the realisation that the worth of a scientific discovery does not depend on the identity of the person who makes it. The acceptance of this fact is connected with the abandoning some centuries ago of the notion of authority in science. Until the Renaissance, a scientific idea was thought to be true because a respected author of long ago – Ptolemy or Galen, for example – had said it was true. But for the past few centuries scientists have been unwilling to accept that view. We now agree that a scientific theory is credible only if it is supported by experiment; since the relevant experiments can, in principle, be done by anyone, the theory is considered to be objectively credible. I am, of course, describing an ideal, and in practice the situation is much more complicated than I have set out here. Even if we take such complications into account, excluding those of a particular nationality from taking part in scientific work greatly damages the objective nature of the collective

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enterprise. It is no longer acceptable, as it was in Nazi Germany, to distinguish between 'German physics' and 'Jewish physics.'

The third argument that my colleagues and I advanced in favour of the principle of the Universality of Science was that contact between scientists in different countries can act as a powerful force against xenophobic nationalism. This is not just wishful thinking: scholars who have studied the matter have given convincing descriptions of certain situations in which scientific collaboration has had beneficial effects in breaking down national barriers. Two examples come to mind: the collaboration of Argentinean and Brazilian scientists in the field of nuclear physics [3], and the collaboration of Egyptian and Israeli scientists in the fields of agriculture and medicine [4].

So these are the arguments that my colleagues and I set out in the article we published in *Nature* (1). They still seem to me to have considerable force, but in a moment I shall add to them a further point which speaks strongly against any suggestion that academic boycotts can be acceptable.

Before that, however, I should like to widen the scope of our subject. Up till now I have confined the discussion to scientists. But the advances from which mankind has benefited in the past several centuries have not been restricted to natural science. We have advanced in our views on what forms of government are desirable, preferring democracy over dictatorships or absolute monarchies; in our distaste for extreme inequalities of wealth; in our unwillingness to tolerate discrimination on the grounds of sex, ethnic origin or sexual orientation; in our treatment of convicts and of prisoners of war; in our practices in the raising of children; and in many other aspects of the way in which we behave towards other human beings – and, indeed, animals. Admittedly, progress in these areas is extremely slow, and much of the time we seem to take two steps forward and one back. Nonetheless, there have been welcome changes in attitudes, and I would contend that such changes can be attributed in good part to the work of scholars in the humanities and the social sciences. The work of these scholars, just like the work of scientists, depends on free interaction between them, often across national boundaries; and if any obstacles are placed in the way of this interaction all of us are the losers. It follows that what we need to uphold is not only the principle of the Universality of Science but a principle of the Universality of Science and Learning.

The arguments I have described so far against boycotting people on the grounds of their country of residence have focused on the undesirable consequences that would flow from such a boycott. But another argument, which is at least as strong as any of the others I have mentioned, can be framed in terms of the undeserved harm that would be suffered by academics subjected to a boycott. In any context, whatever may be the merits of a certain goal that is being sought, it is possible to question whether the means by which it is being pursued are justifiable. Plainly it is not justifiable to use academics that are innocent of any wrongdoing as pawns in the same way as a kidnapper uses hostages – that is, to deprive them of their individuality and autonomy as human beings and turn them into instruments of the political aims of others. So, while it might well be justifiable (or even obligatory) to boycott academics who are involved in illegal or morally unacceptable practices, such a justification would be tenable only if it could be proved that those who are being boycotted are individually responsible for, or complicit in, those practices. To boycott them in the absence of such proof would be to hold them collectively responsible for the actions of others – their government, for example – which in practice they might very well actively oppose. I shall return to this question in more detail later.

Given the four arguments that I have described, which seem to me (and, I think, to most scientists and scholars) to be very strong, can we conclude that the principle of the Universality of Science and Learning must be kept sacrosanct at all times? My answer to this question, and the answer of the colleagues with whom I published in *Nature* in 2003, is No; it is in fact possible to imagine wholly exceptional circumstances in which we would have to abandon the principle of Universality. The reason, as Isaiah Berlin [5] pointed out several decades ago, is that no principle is so uniquely powerful that it can be maintained in all possible situations. On the contrary, two principles that are both desirable in themselves can sometimes come into conflict with one another – an obvious example in national politics is the conflict between the principle of equality and the principle of liberty. After the publication of our *Nature* article four years ago in defence of the Universality of Science, I got an email from someone asking what we would have said in the late 1930s, if there had been a reasonable prospect that a boycott of German and Austrian scientists would have helped to prevent the Second World War and contributed to the overthrow of Hitler. That is the kind of question that is much easier to ask after the event than when one is actually facing desperate circumstances, but it is a question that is well worth thinking about because in contemplating it we may be able to work out appropriate limits to the principle of Universality. In our

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2003 article, my colleagues and I suggested that a boycott of scientific colleagues should not be contemplated except in extreme circumstances in which all four of the following conditions were fulfilled.

First, the danger that the boycott was intended to avoid, or the injustice that it was intended to overcome, was so exceptionally serious that it was worth sacrificing all the many benefits of the principle of Universality in the attempt.

Secondly, the boycott had to have a realistic prospect of success in achieving its aims. There would be no point in throwing away all the advantages that flow from the principle of Universality just for the sake of making a gesture.

Thirdly, there would have to be sufficient support for the boycott that a large majority of scientists would be prepared to apply it. A boycott that was not widely supported would lack legitimacy.

Fourthly – and again in the interests of gaining legitimacy – the proposed boycott would have to be accompanied by a widespread international programme of diplomatic, economic, cultural and sports sanctions. These would demonstrate extreme and widely held concern about a particularly horrific situation that had developed somewhere in the world; in such circumstances scientists would be joining with others in trying to prevent or alleviate a catastrophic outcome.

These four conditions describe an extremely high threshold that would need to be reached before a breach of the principle of Universality could be considered. But that, in my opinion, is as it ought to be. Almost nobody nowadays would argue in favour of discrimination amongst academic colleagues on grounds of sex, age, language or colour of skin. Those who wish to argue for discrimination on grounds of country of residence should be obliged to make a very strong case for it, a case strong enough to trump the powerful arguments that can be mounted in favour of maintaining the principle of the Universality of Science and Learning.

What kind of situation would be grave enough and exceptional enough to justify our abandoning the principle of Universality? In the Nature article I have already referred to (1), my colleagues and I took the example of an approach to a nuclear war, a war which could destroy millions of lives and change the world in unimaginable ways. Clearly, in a situation of that sort, the many benefits that flow from the principle of Universality would no longer be decisive. In those exceptional

circumstances, if an academic boycott would make an important contribution to saving humankind from catastrophe, scientists should be prepared to abandon a principle that they hold very dear – on the assumption that diplomats, people of business, sportsmen, artists and others agreed to join in the boycott of the rogue nation that was threatening to unleash nuclear war.

But what is important about this example is that the situation it envisages is wholly exceptional and represents an extreme emergency. By contrast, in the imperfect world in which we actually live, there are at any moment many disputes – for example territorial disputes – which we may feel strongly about but which cannot be regarded as exceptional and which do not represent an emergency. Given all the good that results from maintaining the principle of Universality, I would argue that it would be wrong to relinquish it on behalf of one party to any of these disputes. In arguing in that way, I imply nothing about the justice of the cause of that party; for example I may believe that the occupation of Tibet by China is a blot on the conscience of mankind but still feel that the principle of Universality of Science and Learning should not be sacrificed in the cause of Tibetan independence.

With these general ideas in mind I can now turn to the task of examining the case that is being made by those who call for a boycott of Israeli academics, and see whether that case comes near to reaching the threshold I have proposed. My task has been made easier by the recent publication of a series of articles setting out the arguments for a boycott of Israel. They appear in a journal called *Academe*, the bulletin of the American Association of University Professors (the AAUP). These are papers that were prepared for a Conference on academic boycotts which the AAUP planned to hold a year ago. For reasons that need not concern us here the Conference never took place. Nonetheless, the AAUP decided to publish the articles in its bulletin last autumn, and so we have the views of the boycotters presented in a form in which we can readily analyse them. As three main arguments for the boycott recur in several of the articles, I think it is reasonable to conclude that the boycotters wish to rely on these to make their case. I shall examine each of them in turn.

First, it is said that the Israeli educational system discriminates against Arab children, with the result that a smaller number of Arab students are admitted to Israeli universities than their proportion in the population warrants. The following is an excerpt from an article by Omar Barghouti [6], quoting a study by Human Rights Watch:

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Discrimination at every level of the Israeli education system winnows out a progressively larger proportion of Palestinian Arab children as they progress through the school system – or channels those who persevere away from the opportunities of higher education. The hurdles Palestinian Arab students face from kindergarten to university function like a series of sieves with sequentially finer holes. At each stage, the education system filters out a higher proportion of Palestinian Arab students than Jewish students.

I have to say that I am sure this allegation is true. In all modern societies the chances that children have of progressing to higher education turns out to depend on the socio-economic status of the families they belong to; and groups of lower socio-economic status tend unfortunately to contain disproportionate numbers of people from ethnic minorities – whether the Arab minority in Israel, the North African minority in France, the Turkish minority in Germany or the African and Caribbean minority in the United Kingdom. The problem is universally acknowledged, and no country seems to have managed to deal satisfactorily with it – not Israel, not France, not Germany, and certainly not the United Kingdom. Let me repeat the piece but making certain changes.

Discrimination at every level of the British education system winnows out a progressively larger proportion of African-Caribbean children as they progress through the school system – or channels those who persevere away from the opportunities of higher education. The hurdles African-Caribbean students face from kindergarten to university function like a series of sieves with sequentially finer holes. At each stage, the education system filters out a higher proportion of African-Caribbean students than white students.

We know, unhappily, that this changed version is just as true as the original, but I have never seen anyone use these facts to justify an academic boycott of the United Kingdom. While the problem that Barghouti draws attention to is a real one, it is a widespread problem of modern societies and cannot possibly amount to a case for an academic boycott of one country.

The boycotters' second argument is based on the allegation that Israeli academic institutions collude in the occupation of Palestinian territories and in discrimination against Arabs. Here is Omar Barghouti again:

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This collusion takes various forms [one of which is] systematically providing the military-intelligence establishment with indispensable research – on demography, geography, hydrology, and psychology, among other disciplines – that directly benefits the occupation apparatus.

And here is an excerpt from an article by Lisa Taraki [7]:

In the Israeli academy, disciplines such as demography, archaeology, sociology, and even architecture have long been part of the colonial project, whether directly or indirectly. That those who work outside the reigning paradigms in these disciplines are in a small minority is testimony to this overriding reality.

The second part of Taraki's argument is self-evidently weak. If I found that in biology departments in UK universities those who work outside the reigning paradigm of Darwinism are in a small minority, I would not be entitled to draw any conclusion from that fact about the organisation of the universities or about the purposes that research in these universities serves. But the main burden of both Barghouti's and Taraki's allegation is that research in Israeli universities is of benefit to what Taraki calls 'the colonial project.' It is worth taking this argument seriously, but we have to rebut it because it is based on a misdescription of what research is. We know that research in at least some of the disciplines that Barghouti and Taraki mention is conducted in Palestinian universities: Taraki is herself Associate Professor of Sociology at BirZeit University. Can we conclude that her research is part of an anti-colonial project? Surely we cannot. The fact that scholars of a particular discipline work in a certain institution indicates nothing except the academic breadth of that institution. Research conducted by a sociologist in an Israeli university might benefit what Barghouti calls the occupation apparatus, but it might equally benefit the Bedouin of the Negev or the Ethiopian minority dispersed throughout Israel – or, indeed, the Palestinian population of the occupied territories themselves. Barghouti, Taraki, and several of the other authors of the series of articles I am considering claim that Israeli universities are responsible for political outcomes that are hateful to them, but this attribution of responsibility is only asserted and never proved.

We can investigate the accusation of collusion between the universities and the institutions of the state more closely if we analyse an excerpt from an article in the same collection by Sondra Hale [8]:

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Israeli educational institutions, as arms of the state, are serving the state through their links with the military, the political parties, the media, and the economy.

The implication is that links of universities with the military, the political parties, the media, and the economy are unusual and sinister. We can examine that implication by looking at a university elsewhere. I shall use my own as an example. The University of Oxford has links with the military through an Oxford University Officers Training Corps, a University Air Squadron and a University Royal Navy Unit, all of them commanded by senior Officers from their respective forces. It has extensive links with the political parties, as we can see if we examine the list of Fellows of Nuffield College or the list of seminars by outside speakers. As to the media, the University has a whole Institute for the Study of Journalism, as well as a Visiting Professor of Broadcast Media. And Oxford's interest in the economy is one of the jewels in the University's crown: the University Calendar boasts that six former members of the Department of Economics have been awarded Nobel Prizes, and that five current Oxford economists have received knighthoods. The Fellows of Nuffield include not only the politicians just referred to but also the Governor of the Bank of England. So what we find is that the proponents of an academic boycott, of whom Hale is one, are criticizing academic institutions in Israel for taking part in activities that are considered entirely appropriate in Universities in the UK. Lisa Taraki does the same sort of thing when she complains that, '[N]o university or association of faculty has ever issued a statement expressing opposition to the occupation.'

In fact, as we shall see in a minute, there is widespread opposition to the occupation amongst Israeli academics, but the universities themselves apparently do not regard the issuing of political statements on contentious issues as one of their proper functions, and certainly not as one of their duties – just as universities in the UK or the USA do not regard it as their duty to issue statements about the war in Iraq or Afghanistan.

Let me turn now to the last of the arguments that purport to justify the proposed boycott. Here is Lisa Taraki once again:

[T]he suppression of dissenting voices in the Israeli academy is one indicator among others of the complicity of university administrations and faculty bodies in the occupation and, indeed, in racism.

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Hilary Rose [9] concurs:

[T]he universities have not harbored many dissidents; rather, they have tended to harass and restrain such individuals.

And Salim Vally [10] writes:

[Israeli C]olleges and universities... have no regard for their fellow academics (Palestinian and dissenting Israeli academics) whose academic freedom is trampled and denied at every turn by the patrons of these colleges and universities.

So the accusation by all of these authors is that Israeli universities suppress dissenters and, to the extent that dissenters exist at all, deny them their academic freedom. Let us examine whether this accusation is true.

First, there is something ironic in such claims being made in a publication that itself includes two papers that are extremely critical of Israeli universities – one by Anat Biletzki, a Professor at Tel-Aviv University, and the other by Omar Barghouti, who is (or was until recently) a doctoral student at the same University.

But, more important, revisionist and dissident academics in fact abound in Israeli universities. Ilan Pappé of Haifa University is a well known dissenter from the policies of the Israeli government; I imagine that even Taraki, Rose and Vally would concede that his views (which are freely published and widely disseminated) are dissident. But these are by no means the only names that one can cite. Neve Gordon of Ben-Gurion University has written about the security barrier on the West Bank, which he calls ‘The Apartheid Wall,’ in the following terms:

The major reason Israeli citizens are not safe is because the government has decided to continue the 37 year-old occupation and oppression of another people. [11]

Lev Grinberg, also from Ben-Gurion, has published the following appeal:

The murder of Sheikh Ahmad Yassin is part of a general policy carried out by the government of the State of Israel which could be described as symbolic genocide... As a child of the Jewish people, and as an Israeli citizen, I condemn

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this abominable act and appeal to the international community to save Israel from itself. [12]

Uri Ram of Ben-Gurion University has written:

Israel must be reminded what it tries to make everybody forget: the occupation is unlawful; the settlements are unlawful; any activity of the occupying power which is not necessitated by immediate security considerations or the temporary upkeep of the area until its return to its local population is unlawful. Moreover, it is illegitimate and amoral. [13]

Yehouda Shenhav of Tel-Aviv University has described the separation barrier as follows:

The main purpose of the Wall which Israel is building in the West Bank is not to protect Israeli civilians from terrorist attacks. The Wall is clearly political, and the international community easily recognized this. It is a wall whose purpose is to annex occupied lands. It is a wall that creates expulsion (population 'transfer') of Palestinians trapped between the Green Line and the route of the barrier. [14]

Oren Yiftachel of Ben-Gurion University has written of Israel in this way:

The case of Israel well illustrates the making of an ethnocratic regime. It has evolved around the central Zionist (and uni-ethnic) project of Judaizing Israel/Palestine. This strategy was implemented by land, settlement, immigration and military policies, and created a stratified and segregated political geography. Most notably, the Judaization project has caused the pervasive dispossession of Palestinian-Arabs. [15]

In addition to the scholars whose individual writings I have cited, academics are prominent in the anti-occupation organisations B'Tselem, Gush Shalom and Yesh G'vul; and a further organisation, HaKampus Lo Shotek, was founded specifically for members of Israeli universities who are opposed to the occupation. Twenty-eight Professors have put their names to a statement that says (amongst other things) that:

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The state of Israel was supposed to be a democracy; it has set up a colonial structure, combining unmistakable elements of apartheid with the arbitrariness of brutal military occupation. [16]

And at last count 358 members of the faculties of Israeli universities had signed a petition on-line demanding an end to the occupation of the West Bank and stating:

We wish to express our appreciation and support for those of our students and lecturers who refuse to serve as soldiers in the occupied territories. [17]

We should bear these quotations in mind when we read Lisa Taraki writing about the suppression of dissenting voices in Israeli universities, Hilary Rose about the harassment and restraint of dissidents and Salim Vally about the denial and trampling of their academic freedom. And we should also bear in mind that these claims of suppression, harassment, restraint, denial and trampling are being used as a pretext for proposing an exceptionally grave step – that members of the faculty of Israeli Universities, unlike members of the faculty of Chinese universities, Russian universities, Turkish universities or Sudanese universities, should be cut off from scholarly and scientific contact with their colleagues in other countries.

Finally I want to consider the suggestion, often made by supporters of an academic boycott against Israeli universities, that their campaign is parallel to the boycott of South African universities in the 1980s, which (they claim) made an important contribution to the overthrow of apartheid. This claim is often linked to the assertion that Israel resembles South Africa under apartheid. I need not waste space in debunking that assertion, which seems to me to be nothing but a misuse of language. There is no serious doubt that discrimination against the minority population in Israel is widespread and deplorable; but unhappily Israel is not unique in that respect among the countries of the world, and I cannot recall countries that are hosts to Roma minorities in Europe or Kurdish minorities in the Middle East – minorities which as we know suffer appalling discrimination – being compared with apartheid South Africa. Nor do I remember that South Africa in apartheid times had black ambassadors or black justices of the Supreme Court. But even if we reject the comparison of Israel with apartheid-era South Africa as the false analogy that it clearly is, it is still worth studying the history of the academic boycott of South African universities as an example of how such a boycott has worked in practice. An analysis of the history has recently been published [18] by Jonathan Hyslop, who is Deputy Director of the Wits Institute for Social and Economic

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Research at the University of the Witwatersrand in South Africa. His article is particularly interesting because Hyslop was at the University of the Witwatersrand throughout the 1980s, witnessed the effects of the boycott at first hand, and was for a time a supporter of it.

One important feature of that history, which finds a clear echo today among those who propose a boycott of Israeli universities, was the dispute between those who called for a total boycott and those who wanted a selective boycott. In the initial phase, South Africa was excluded from all academic connection and exchange. It soon became clear that this form of total boycott led to major problems and injustices. Scholars from outside South Africa who wanted to lend their support to what Hyslop calls the ‘explosion of critical scholarship, cultural production and activism that the revolutionary times had produced on South African campuses’ found themselves unable to give such support since they were expected to boycott all South African scholars. Moreover, South African academics who were active in the anti-apartheid movement (and there were many of them) sometimes travelled abroad in the anti-apartheid cause – but then found, in a series of ironic episodes, that they were boycotted by members of anti-apartheid movements when they sought to speak at British universities. In one case an international congress had to be moved from its original venue, Southampton, when the local authority discovered that a distinguished South African academic was to participate; the city fathers were unmoved by the argument that the scholar was an opponent of apartheid who had worked vigorously, and at considerable danger to himself, to promote racial equality in his country.

For reasons of this sort, the total boycott was replaced after some time by a selective boycott, in which visits by some academics were deemed by the boycotters to be acceptable on the grounds that the scholars concerned were politically sound. The ethical problems with this approach are, I think, self-evident. What kind of political test could one properly apply to academics? Would they have to subscribe to particular political declarations? Who would draw up such declarations, and how would intellectual pluralism be safeguarded? Hyslop’s answer to these questions is unequivocal: ‘[T]he selective boycott created a set of irresolvable dilemmas.’

But in any case we have to ask whether the academic boycott made an important contribution to the overthrow of apartheid, which we can all agree was a shameful evil. Here is Hyslop’s view (and let us remember that he was at the forefront of the struggle against apartheid within one of the largest South African universities):

I can honestly say that, throughout the 1980s, I did not talk to a single South African scholar or university employee whose political views had been changed in any way by the academic boycott. Whereas the economic boycott had some palpable effect on the regime, and sports and cultural boycotts had irritant effects on white society, the academic boycott had little in the way of visible achievements.

I should like to end by citing Hyslop's conclusion about the way in which academics outside South Africa conducted themselves during the boycott.

Too often, the ostensible topic of South Africa simply became the occasion for a kind of parading of the foreign scholar's moral virtue. In much anti-apartheid writing of the time, we find out very little about South Africa but a great deal about the author's ethical qualities as an opponent of apartheid. The practice of the boycott often became a gesture of separating oneself from the sphere of evil rather than intellectually engaging with the realities of a society in travail. When travelling abroad in the 1980s, I was struck by the way in which many keen supporters of the boycott were uninterested in discussing the details of what was happening in South Africa. South Africa was merely the occasion for them to play a heroic (in reality, mock-heroic) role on the stage of the theater of morality.

I believe that today's boycotters would do well to ponder on this conclusion. It is a good deal easier to make grand gestures than to engage with the complexities of so intractable a problem as the conflict between Israel and her neighbours.

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Notes

- [1] http://www.icsu.org/5_abouticsu/STATUTES.htm
- [2] Colin Blakemore, Richard Dawkins, Denis Noble and Michael Yudkin 2003, *Nature* 421, p. 314.
- [3] P. Wrobel and J.R. Redick (1998) 'Nuclear cooperation in South America,' in *Scientific cooperation, state conflict: The role of scientists in mitigating international discord* (edited by

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- [4] A. Keynan and D. Shoham (1998) 'Scientific cooperation in agriculture and medical research as a means of normalizing relations between Egypt and Israel,' in de Cerreño and Keynan (eds.) op.cit. pp. 182-99.
- [5] Isaiah Berlin (2002) 'Two Concepts of Liberty,' in *Liberty* (edited by Henry Hardy), pp. 166-217. Oxford University Press, Oxford.
- [6] Omar Barghouti (2006) *Academe: Bulletin of the American Association of University Professors* 92 (5), p. 44.
- [7] Lisa Taraki (2006) *Academe: Bulletin of the American Association of University Professors* 92 (5), p. 56.
- [8] Sondra Hale (2006) *Academe: Bulletin of the American Association of University Professors* 92 (5), p. 51.
- [9] Hilary Rose (2006) *Academe: Bulletin of the American Association of University Professors* 92 (5), p. 53.
- [10] Salim Vally (2006) *Academe: Bulletin of the American Association of University Professors* 92 (5), p. 64.
- [11] Neve Gordon (2004) <http://www.counterpunch.org/gordon02232004.html>
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- [14] Yehouda Shenhav (2006) www.alternativenews.org
- [15] Oren Yiftachel (1999) *Constellations* 6, p. 364.
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- [18] Jonathan Hyslop (2006) *Academe: Bulletin of the American Association of University Professors* 92 (5), p. 59.