



The unspoken purpose of the academic boycott

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ABSTRACT

The academic boycott of Israel, ostensibly targeting Israeli academe, is actually meant to isolate and stigmatise Jewish academics in America. It serves the aim of pushing Jewish academics out of shrinking disciplines, where Jews are believed to be ‘over-represented.’ That is how diehard supporters of the Palestinians find academic allies who have no professional interest in Palestine, in fields like American studies or English literature.

KEYWORDS Academic boycott; American universities; Israeli policy; Jewish faculty; Palestinians

What is behind the spread of the academic boycott movement? The usual explanation is that Israel’s policies, particularly Israel’s blockade of Gaza, the way it wages its war on Hamas, and its settlement policy in the West Bank, have pushed American academics over the edge. American academe, with its overwhelming liberal-left bias, has grown alienated from the Jewish state. This has created an opening for boycott advocates, who trade on the analogy between Israel and South Africa. If a boycott worked to end apartheid, it can work to end the occupation – so goes the argument.

Let us begin by asking a simple question: who does the boycott seek to stigmatise and isolate? The simple answer would be: Israeli institutions of higher education, since they are the ostensible targets of the boycott. But that answer is way too simple. I am going to anticipate my more complex answer, and then explain it.

The academic boycott of Israel is actually meant to isolate and stigmatise Jewish academics in America. It serves the aim of pushing Jewish academics out of shrinking disciplines, where Jews are believed to be ‘over-represented.’ That is how diehard supporters of the Palestinians find academic allies who have little interest in Palestine, in fields like American studies or English literature.

For these allies, it is not about the Israeli occupation of Palestinian territories. It is about the presumed Jewish occupation of American academe by Jewish faculty and administrators. Decades ago, a litmus test on Israel and

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Palestine was used to push Jews to the margins of Middle Eastern studies. Now the strategy is being imitated in other fields, where academic positions are scarce and Jews have some of the best of them. In the words of the American congressman Tip O'Neill, all politics is local – and so are the politics of the academic boycott.

But first, let me dispense with the conventional argument: that the academic boycott is meant to stigmatise and isolate Israel's research universities. This cannot be done, and the boycotters know it. Israel's universities are highly productive, and their research output cannot be ignored. They aren't South African universities. They also have highly developed institutional partnerships all over the world, in both North America and Europe, in fields as diverse as computer science, business, and medicine.

The targets aren't individual Israelis either. The boycott applies to institutions, not individuals. For example, when the American Studies Association (ASA) passed its boycott resolution in 2013, it announced that Israelis could still attend the ASA and deliver papers. The ASA even announced that Israeli university presidents could present at their annual conference, in their personal capacities. So the academic boycott doesn't do much to stigmatise or isolate individual Israelis. Despite an academic boycott, an Israeli can go off to an ASA conference, present a paper, and safely put it down on his or her resume as a credential for appointment or promotion.

But let us say that the person in question is a young doctoral student or assistant professor in an American university in some field of the humanities. Quite possibly she is Jewish, and someone in Israel has heard of her work. She opens an email, and there it is: an invitation to an academic conference in Jerusalem or Tel Aviv. The theme is right up her alley. The organisers will fly her over, put her up, show her around, and will edit the proceedings of the conference.

Normally, she wouldn't think twice – she would shoot back an email saying 'I accept your kind invitation,' and call her dad to tell him she is finally going to Israel. But her professional society has just passed a boycott resolution at its annual conference. What does she do?

If she does go to Israel, someone might point a finger at her: she's a boycott buster, she's acted outside the bounds of her discipline, she's been unprofessional. If she is up for appointment or tenure, does she want that conference in Israel on her c.v.? What if someone on the academic committee sees himself as a boycott enforcer, and spots it? Will this torpedo her candidacy or promotion? Sure, she doesn't agree with all of Israel's policies; she might even be openly critical of them. But is she going to shun her Israeli peers by refusing their invitation? What does she do?

And let me give you an example of the language of these enforcers – this, from a professor of history at the University of California at Irvine, published on Facebook in 2014. (I apologise for the language.)

'Machers' in the American Jewish community get up in arms about BDS. Well ... fuck you. Call me uncivil, but still, fuck you. Fuck all of you who want to make arguments about civility and about how Israel wants peace ... and how you are in fact a 'critic' of Israel. There is only one criticism of Israel that is relevant: It is a state grown, funded and feeding off the destruction of another people. It is not legitimate. It must be dismantled, the same way that other racist, psychopathic states across the region must be dismantled. And everyone who enables it is morally complicit in its crime, including you.¹

This is the intimidating language of the boycott enforcers, they have tenure, and they show no quarter.

She, the young academic, can accept the invitation and take the risk – and it is a risk. If she's up for a rare job in her field, it could kill her chances. She can turn down the invitation, say nothing, and become a Jew of silence. Cary Nelson is the former president of the American Association of University Professors. He has written the following: 'I know many secret Zionists who avoid expressing public support for Israel. They worry that to do so might torpedo their jobs. They worry it might limit their chance at presenting a conference paper or being appointed to a committee.'² One option is to become one of these crypto-Zionists.

But perhaps even silence isn't enough if you are in the humanities. Nelson goes on to add this: 'Only virulent hostility toward Israel wins broad approval among American humanities faculty.'³ You need broad approval to advance. So a third option is to show some virulent hostility yourself – especially if you are a Jew, and therefor naturally suspected of secretly being a Zionist. And virulent obviously doesn't mean supporting a two-state solution; that doesn't count. The boycotters on your faculty expect you to denounce Israel as an apartheid state, support the Palestinian right of return, perhaps even accuse Israel of genocide.

It is this young Jewish American graduate student or junior professor who is stigmatised and isolated by the academic boycott of Israel. She has to pass a litmus test, and it is one that's hardest to pass for Jews.

Now litmus tests for Jews in the academy are nothing new. In the 19th century, in universities in Germany and Russia, a Jew couldn't be appointed to a professorship unless he renounced Judaism and converted to Christianity. In the early 20th century, in the Ivy League, a Jew couldn't be appointed to a professorship unless he shed his 'clannishness' and detached himself from Jewish life.

All these litmus tests were meant to restrict the Jewish presence in the academy. Since World War Two, it seemed as though the litmus tests had disappeared: this was a 'golden era' for Jews in academe. But we are now seeing the re-emergence of the litmus test: if a Jew wishes to take his or her place in certain parts of the academy, he or she must first renounce Zionism

and denounce Israel. And the motive for imposing this litmus test is the same as all past litmus tests: it is to restrict the Jewish presence in the academy.

Why would a litmus test reemerge? We are used to thinking of American academe in the past few generations as a welcoming place for Jews. As early as 1969, according to the largest survey ever, Jews constituted 9% of the faculty nationwide, and 17% of the faculty in the highest-ranked universities. And at the highest-ranked universities, Jewish faculty made up 36% of law, 34% of sociology, 28% of economics, 28% of medicine, and 26% of physics (all figures for the upcoming faculty under 35).⁴ This, at a time when Jews had fallen to 3% of the population. Today, the figures may be even higher, while Jews have fallen to under 2% of the population.

Jews also had more exalted status within the academy. Reviewing the same data, sociologist Seymour Martin Lipset noted that

academic achievements of the Jewish faculty are reflected in their rank and financial status. Although slightly younger on the average than non-Jews . . . a larger percentage of Jews were full professors. And the salaries of the Jewish professors were considerably higher than those of other faculty.⁵

In recent decades, Jews also have risen to high positions in university administration, including the presidencies of major universities. It began in 1968, when Edward Levi became president of the University of Chicago. The list is now long, and includes past and present presidents of Harvard, Princeton, Yale, Cal Tech, and MIT. We like to believe that the university, as a place of liberal enlightenment, is perfectly at ease with this Jewish ‘over-representation.’ Academe is a meritocracy, and Jews enjoy their outsized place by virtue of their merit, which, we assume, is universally acknowledged.

But this situation evolved under particular conditions. After the Holocaust, antisemitism in America declined, and quotas restricting Jews became an embarrassment. But just as important, after World War Two, rising enrolments created a faculty shortage, which gave Jewish academics an initial rung on the ladder.

Today the situation is reversed. The Holocaust has receded in memory, and Jews are regarded not as targets of prejudice but as bearers of privilege. And in much of academe, especially the humanities and social sciences, student demand is weak and falling, full-time academic jobs are rare, and budgets are being cut. For every tenured position, the competition has become cutthroat.

And where competition is cutthroat, anything goes. Academe now seethes with struggles over diversity, ethnicity, gender and race, and it would be naïve to think that Jewish ‘over-representation’ isn’t an issue anymore.

Of course, no one will stand up and say that there are too many Jews in a discipline – that would be deemed blatantly antisemitic. Instead, sociological theses are advanced. For example, one can now encounter the thesis,

dressed up as an empirical study, that Jews are being admitted to elite colleges at rates that aren't justified by their merit.⁶ The suggestion is then made that Jews on university faculty and in higher administration are unconsciously doing what WASPs did in the early 20th century: skewing admissions criteria so that their own kind are preferred over others.

This thesis can then be extended from student admissions to faculty appointments. These, so it is suggested, are subject to the subtle influence of 'ethnic networking.' Such networking is common and legitimate in economic activity. It's not supposed to happen in well-regulated universities. The insinuation is that it does happen, and while Jews aren't the only ones who do it, Jews do it better than anyone else, perhaps because their network includes not just faculty and administrators but also donors.

The academic boycott is the answer: it is agitation to establish a moral litmus test that Jews will have the hardest time passing. It is thus no accident that the associations that have passed academic boycott resolutions represent fields in the humanities and social sciences which are in the deepest crisis.

Consider the analysis of almost a thousand academics who had signed or endorsed one of the statements calling for an academic boycott of Israel. Fully half came from the humanities, another third from the social sciences; the largest single disciplinary affiliation, by a large margin, was English and literature. The compiler of this study was perplexed. After all, she wrote, 'there is no obvious connection between the discipline of English and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.'⁷

Of course there isn't, but that isn't the point. The relevant points are these: First, English literature is a field in which the job market has been in a free fall since 2008. In the decade between 2007 and 2017, the number of jobs on offer fell by more than half.⁸ Most PhDs don't get jobs and feelings of betrayal and distrust are rampant.

Second, English lit was one of the very last bastions of academe which was breached by Jews. When, in 1969, Jews formed more than a quarter of the faculty in law, physics, sociology, and economics, they were only 7% of the faculty in English. Historically, this was the discipline most resistant to appointing Jews. But eventually, in they came. Now the discipline leads the way in imposing the litmus test of the academic boycott that Jews will have the hardest time passing.

At the time Israel was created, such a test wasn't needed. When Lionel Trilling became the first Jew tenured in Columbia's English department back in 1944, he was told straight out not to think of himself 'as a wedge to open the English department to more Jews.'⁹ Today, those who fear 'ethnic networking' by Jews need a more subtle tactic. They have found an ideal one in the academic boycott of Israel.

The other fields that make up the boycotters' specialities are almost as troubled, every one of them is contracting, and in every one of them, Jews are

‘over-represented.’ In this setting, the Israel-Palestine issue gets blown out of proportion, not because it gives rise to special outrage, but because one side of it is, by association, ‘over-represented’ and thus resented in disciplines undergoing a wrenching downsizing.

The debate over Israel and the Palestinians is mostly a proxy fight for the real fight. Some have argued that Israel’s conduct is prompting antisemitism. In the case of American academe, the opposite is true: rolling back the ‘disproportionate’ Jewish presence is served by the disproportionate inflation of Israel’s supposed crimes. Israel in Gaza becomes a useful stick with which to beat the local Jews. The boycotter who isn’t an Arab wants a boycott, not to keep Jews out of the faraway West Bank, but to keep Jews out of the downstairs faculty lounge – to make room for someone else.

I have not used the word antisemitism here. But the remedy, if there is one, is to begin speaking frankly about what is really at work, and to avoid euphemisms. The academic boycott isn’t mostly Israel’s problem. It is America’s problem – and specifically the problem of American Jews. They must decide if the place earned by Jews in American academe is worth preserving. If it isn’t, then at least Israel has vibrant universities and colleges that can make up the difference.

Notes

1. History professor Mark Levine, quoted by Nelson, “Conspiracy Pedagogy”
2. Nelson, “Am I a Zionist?”
3. Ibid.
4. This was the 1969 survey by the Carnegie Commission Survey on Higher Education, as analysed by Steinberg, *The Academic Melting Post*.
5. Lipset, “Jewish Academics”.
6. Unz, “The Myth”.
7. Rossman-Benjamin, “Interrogating”.
8. Kramnick, “What We Hire”.
9. Diana Trilling, “Lionel Trilling”.

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Notes on contributor

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