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Disciplinary Peace Above All Else?

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[“When It’s Time to Vote, Don’t Boycott Academics – Cut the Purse-strings”](#) raises important questions about the power of economic divestment in the struggle for Palestinian rights. In so doing, however, it presents us with not one, but two false choices. First, it tells us to pursue economic divestment instead of academic boycott. Why is this an either/or, when the two are mutually reinforcing parts of a common struggle? And why assume we are not also advocating economic divestment in other arenas in which we work? Second, it presents the AAA with a meaningless choice between an action that is within its power as *an academic association* (academic boycott) and one that isn’t (ending US aid to Israel).

At Columbia University, the first act of collective protest against the Israeli government was organized in 2001, a year after the second intifada had begun, and it was a call on the university to divest from U.S. companies that sold military hardware to the Israeli state. A few months ago, a student-led initiative, with faculty support, renewed and broadened that call for economic divestment. Likewise, faculty and students at other universities have taken up the divestment call (for example, faculty at Princeton in 2015). Economic divestment is a central strategy of BDS, and it has had some important successes of late, especially in Europe.^[1] In fact, lobbying and directing pressure at Congress is and always has been part of the strategy of the movement for peace and justice in Israel/Palestine.

There have been years of organizing efforts to educate Congress and move it to put economic and political pressure on Israel. To claim that we are failing to focus on the real game in town is to ignore decades of political work that has by and large failed. The academic boycott is an integral part of both educating and pressuring Congress by sparking a conversation about Israel and Palestine that has been impossible in this country. And the effects of the strategic choice of academic boycott have been remarkable: It has brought critical conversation into the U.S. public domain in a way I have never seen before. Moreover, trading the academic boycott—a direct action by the American Anthropological Association designed to continue to shake up the public conversation—for a call that the AAA merely send letters to Congress protesting U.S.

economic and military aid ignores the context of who we are and the institutional context within which we are acting: As anthropologists, we are demanding that our professional organization actually does something and that it does it in our name.

This is not a matter of taking our eyes off the prize. The pushback that the Israeli government, the major American Zionist institutions, members of Congress, and private funders have brought to bear on this campaign says a lot: This *is* proving to be an effective strategy; it *is* disrupting the long hegemonic narrative about Israel and Palestine in the U.S. public domain. Perhaps, in so doing, it is forging the way for the possibility of successful economic divestment campaigns to come.

Are there anthropologists who have not signed onto the boycott who have experienced hostility, or who are afraid to speak? There may well be. But to focus on such instances is to ignore the overwhelming evidence of the systematic hostility and discrimination that those of us who have been critical of Israel in our work—and those who have supported the boycott, as students or as faculty—have faced.[\[2\]](#) This is not just about *our discipline*. This is about the university structure as a whole, and the influence wielded against critical speech on Israel/Palestine by those within and beyond. There is no Campus Watch, or Canary Mission that tracks the speech and writings of Israel's supporters, and whose explicit aim is to block graduate students from getting jobs and faculty from getting tenure. There is no university president who has made claims about anti-boycott anthropologists equivalent to Larry Summer's argument that the call for divestment is anti-Semitic, "in effect if not intent." And there is no consortium of university presidents backing our call to boycott Israeli institutions, no equivalent to the recent letter sent by UC President Janet Napolitano and all ten of the Chancellors of the University of California system to the American Anthropological Association to express their dismay at the impending vote. In other words, there is no symmetry here and perhaps, as anthropologists, that is the operation of power to which we should attend.

Are we punishing colleagues who do not support the boycott? Are we dividing the discipline, making it a more acrimonious place? I have colleagues who have and have not signed onto the boycott, and I certainly don't consider their stance on the boycott a political litmus test. I have students who do and do not support the boycott (and many whose position I don't know), and I certainly don't punish or reward any of them for their particular stance. (You are free to ask around if you please). By way of contrast, I have pushed back hard against those driving the opposition to the boycott. I have done so not simply because we disagree but because of their refusal to acknowledge what it is we are actually asking for, and their misrepresentation of BDS and its goals (claiming that it is actually a

violent movement, that its end game is a one state solution, that there is a whiff or even the stench of anti-Semitism in our call).[3] Those are politically pernicious accusations, and they must be responded to. Does that create acrimony in our discipline? Perhaps. But perhaps there are issues—and moments—at which what is at stake is more important than disciplinary peace. No doubt, for signatories of the letter calling on us to “cut the purse strings” instead, there are issues over which it might be worth producing disagreement among colleagues, acrimony even. The real question is this: Is the “Question of Palestine,” to quote Edward Said, important *and urgent* enough? For me, it is.

Notes

[1] See <http://www.endtheoccupation.org/section.php?id=321>;
<http://www.endtheoccupation.org/section.php?id=203>

[2] See <http://palestinelegal.org/the-palestine-exception>

[3] See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=e3li2kY6p7Q>;
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NxaJ5FMemWY>;
http://www.huffingtonpost.com/richard-a-shweder/targeting-the-israeli-aca_b_9540974.html; For a critique of the anti-Semitism charge, see
<http://savageminds.org/2016/04/22/jaccuse-how-not-to-have-a-political-debate-about-bds/>

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