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## Graduate Student Response to "When It's Time to Vote, Don't Boycott Academics--Cut the Purse Strings"

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As graduate students and new members of the American Association of Anthropologists, we approach the academic boycott resolution vote with hope. We write today in response to "[When It's Time to Vote, Don't Boycott—Cut the Purse-strings](#)", which outlines an argument against the resolution and calls instead for "targeted, collective action". The academic boycott is exactly this: a targeted, collective action, and one that students across the country have chosen to support. In the past few months, graduate student unions at NYU, the University of California, and the University of Massachusetts, Amherst, have voted to boycott and divest from Israeli occupation industries and Israeli academic institutions. [At NYU, over half of voting graduate students also pledged to personally uphold an academic boycott.](#) We voted for the AAA boycott resolution because it is a collective action that respects the autonomy and judgment of Palestinian civil society, who have determined for themselves, over the last 50 years, how to best engage those who wish to stand in solidarity with their struggle against the occupation.

Thousands of students across the country are organizing to answer the call from Palestinian civil society to pressure the Israeli state to meet its obligations as an occupying power under international law and to recognize the Palestinian people's inalienable right to self-determination, dignity, and protection. An academic boycott aims to cut the purse strings between academic institutions: it asks the AAA membership to boycott conferences, consortiums, and grants sponsored by Israeli state-funded institutions. It agrees with those authors' admirable commitment to resisting the occupation but does not exempt academic labor and exchange from the purview of the boycott. Academic speech is never free of funding or institutional stakes, and we must leverage our collective authority as professional intellectuals, attuned as we anthropologists are to excesses of state violence and censorship-by-fear. This muddling between claimed intensions and prescriptions for more "correct" alternatives to end the occupation is perplexing at best. At worst, "When It's Time to Vote,

Don't Boycott" is another example of the many tactics used to confuse, derail, and discredit those who view academic boycott as a viable, measured, and appropriate response to the current attacks on Palestinian academic freedom.

The authors of "When It's Time to Vote, Don't Boycott Academics" write that, "American academics are just as complicit in the crimes of our own government as Israeli academics are in crimes of theirs." We agree. But such a comparison obscures the specificity and context of this boycott. There currently exists no such call from the grassroots in places affected by U.S. policy to boycott U.S. academic institutions. Should there be such a call, we hope the AAA will support it. Meanwhile, many of us have participated in boycotts within our own institutions, such as the University of California subcontracted workers' call for a boycott of on-campus lectures until equal-wage contracts are guaranteed.

The authors suggest that not only this resolution but the "very idea of academic boycott" is "tearing our field apart". We believe that protecting the ability to organize and participate in boycotts is necessary for any democratic organization. Students have long led and participated in boycott movements, including the effective academic boycott of apartheid South Africa. We refuse to participate in the ongoing repression of Palestinian students and faculty, who are [discriminated against at every stage of schooling](#); [excluded from Israeli universities](#); and [targeted and repressed when organizing at their universities](#). The boycott offers us a way to publicly articulate this refusal.

The authors also argue that, "the call for *academic* boycott has injected poison into the field and engendered cacophony, acrimony, and deep, often paralyzing anxiety. Many a friendship has been strained, or lost, or sacrificed these past few years. Once cordial professional relationships have soured or been severed". This suggests that the bullying, censoring, and policing of "acceptable speech" in our field—aimed particularly against those who study Israel/Palestine—is not *already* poisonous. [Online anti-boycott campaigns target junior and untenured faculty](#). Organizations like Canary Mission [single out and harass anthropology students and faculty](#) in an attempt to harm job prospects. [A recent lawsuit targets individual professors](#) involved in the 2013 American Studies Association vote to endorse the boycott of Israeli academic institution. Such tactics are part of an organized and concerted campaign aimed not at maintaining the integrity of our discipline but at preventing the resolution from passing and exhausting people into indifference.

The authors ask what kind of anthropology this is. We believe this is an anthropology committed to critical, ethical engagement with the world and to the work of social justice and solidarity. The definition of academic

freedom, as adopted by [the United Nations](#), states that the “enjoyment of academic freedom carries with it *obligations*, such as the duty to respect the academic freedom of others, to ensure the fair discussion of contrary views, and to treat all without discrimination on any of the prohibited grounds.” The academic boycott is an exercise in academic freedom; it is our chance to answer the call of Palestinian civil society and every single Palestinian university. It is up to us to take seriously the requests of our Palestinian colleagues and to stand with them. Let us act immediately and purposely in voting for the academic boycott.

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