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When It's Time to Vote, Don't Boycott Academics – Cut the Purse-strings

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Editor's note: We received this letter, signed by the authors listed above and by nine anonymous authors, as a reply to our earlier [Debate Forum](#).

After far too long a moratorium on reasoned debate, a terrible dam first cracked, then crumbled. Certainly the current sturm und drang about American academics' relationship to the ever more disastrous situation in Israel/Palestine is urgent, and long overdue. But just what kind of conversation is taking place – and where will it lead? Where *should* it lead?

These are urgent questions for us anthropologists. Beginning last Friday, April 15, and until May 31, members of the American Anthropological Association (AAA) face a momentous decision: to vote either for or against an academic boycott of Israel, a state whose policies, actions, and inaction have wrought untold harm on Palestinians' health, well-being, and dignity. As committed anthropologists – most of us junior and untenured – we approach this vote with trepidation, and rage.

We are enraged by the occupation of Palestinian people and lands, an occupation that is immoral, illegal, and unjust. We know that the devastating impact of decades of Israeli policy, especially on the physical and mental health of Palestinian children, will persist long into the future, whatever the political tides may bring. And we agree that now is the time for strong statements.

Yet strong statements are not enough. It is also time for targeted, collective action.

Some of our colleagues have appealed for "dialogue" in lieu of boycott, but "dialogue," too, is insufficient. Dialogue is far too little, and far too late.

At the same time, we know full well that academic boycott is the wrong tool for the job, and we trust that the majority of our colleagues will agree. [As Noam Chomsky and others have insisted](#), we need better tools than this – tools that are more powerful, more precise, and better suited to the task at

hand.

For reasons we cannot quite comprehend, the strongest tool in the toolkit has hardly figured in recent anthropological debates about Israel/Palestine. What American anthropologists *should* be doing is actually quite clear and straightforward. Those who oppose Israel's violations of Palestinians' dignity and human rights should begin leveraging our field's methods and insights to advance a new movement: a movement to *educate our elected representatives* about the devastating effects of the occupation we are underwriting, and to *exert pressure on our government* to stop footing the bill. After all, it is we – those of us who are American citizens, and American taxpayers – who are bankrolling Israel's violent regime of domination and control. Indeed, we have continued to do so [even as Israel's elected leaders have spurned the office of our president](#), and even as Israeli public discourse has spiraled further and further downward into the kind of ethnocentrism, [racism](#), and [xenophobia](#) that now find parallel among our most vulgar compatriots here in the U.S.

At this pivotal moment, we appeal to all who are eager to employ peaceful protest tactics – perhaps, under certain circumstances, even tactics like boycott, divestment, or sanctions – but recognize that an *academic* boycott is not the right way to go. We appeal to all who are outraged and infuriated by Israel's policies toward Palestinian people and lands, the Palestinian economy, Palestinian civil society – and who are sickened by the fact that *we*, as citizens and taxpayers, are partially complicit.

We call upon our fellow anthropologists to join us on a two-fold path: first, to oppose the misdirected notion of academic boycott, and second, to *act* immediately, purposefully, and in solidarity with Palestinians to pressure the U.S. government to stop allowing Israel to occupy, humiliate, and traumatize in our name. Below, we offer five reasons to pursue this path.

- 1. U.S. taxpayers hold a good measure of direct responsibility for Israel's occupation of Palestinian people and lands.** The most direct and expedient way for American anthropologists to help end the occupation is straightforward: we must press our government to cut the purse-strings. We must insist that our elected leaders stop pandering to groups like AIPAC, which revealed at its last conference ([keynote speaker: Donald Trump](#)) that the group represents neither Israel's best interests, nor those of the United States. (Nor, for that matter, does it speak for the vast majority of American Jews.) American anthropologists must work concertedly toward these goals, and we must do so in solidarity and collaboration with likeminded Palestinians and

Israelis, among others. In working toward these goals, we must take pains to avoid being tainted by the scourges of racism or anti-Semitism.

2. American academics are just as complicit in the crimes of our own government as Israeli academics are in crimes of theirs.

Most top-tier universities in the United States benefit from Department of Defense funding – American tax dollars at work. Many universities permit military recruitment on their campuses. And as taxpayers, American academics are just as complicit in the actions of the U.S. government and U.S. military – including the invasion and occupation of Iraq and Afghanistan, torture at Guantanamo, drone strikes that kill civilians in Pakistan, and [possibly recent war crimes in Yemen](#) – as Israeli academics are in theirs. If this measure of complicity warrants academic boycott, shouldn't a global boycott of American academic institutions be a top priority as well?

3. The proposal for academic boycott indicates no clear endpoint, and that's a huge problem. For some of us, this is the deepest and most serious flaw of the boycott proposal. [The boycott resolution offers no clarity, and no specifics, regarding when – if ever – an academic boycott of Israeli institutions would end.](#)

Meaningful boycotts have clear targets, and clear endpoints. Those considering boycott should step back and ask: Am I really ready to join a campaign so open-ended it may never achieve its goals – and [so vaguely defined it can serve as a fig leaf for unspecified political agendas I may find objectionable?](#)

4. Advocates of academic boycott claim that only institutions are targeted, not individuals – but that's not what's happening in practice.

Whatever the outcome of the AAA vote, a powerful chilling effect is already palpable. In anthropology, as in other fields, advocates of boycott have already begun refusing to review manuscripts and grant proposals, host (or attend) talks, write letters of recommendation, or advise students. Scholars, junior and senior, have found themselves admonished for publicly taking a stand. This holds true even for scholars with no ties to the region. For instance, one of us with no regional ties was told they could not conduct a research project on infectious disease in the West

Bank without violating the terms of the boycott. Another, who happens to be Jewish but has no ties to the region, lamented that in their academic home, any effort to reflect critically on the proposal for an academic boycott was immediately – and wrongly – interpreted as blanket support for occupation and the systematic violation of Palestinians’ human rights. In short, to claim that an academic boycott would solely target institutions, not individuals, is disingenuous at best. (See why the junior anthropologists among us are advancing this statement anonymously?)

5. **The very idea of academic boycott is tearing our field**

apart. Revolutionary movements typically aim to build solidarity for a liberatory agenda by recruiting from the broadest potential base of supporters. In some respects, the BDS movement has done just this. It has broken the silence and catalyzed a crucial conversation about catastrophe and complicity. Yet 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. Many anthropologists have chosen, or felt pressured, to sign one petition, or another. As the call for academic boycott has reverberated through our community, possibilities for the kind of targeted political action *that could actually make a difference* have been sidelined by boycott proponents’ single-minded focus on one blunt, and ultimately ineffectual, tool.

This, then, is the second reason we are enraged. We are committed to advancing this extraordinarily important conversation, but we are enraged by the impact this narrow-minded proposal is having on our discipline and our intellectual community. The proposal has flattened history and complexity into a false binary: support an academic boycott and stand on what some are speciously calling “the right side of history,” or oppose boycott and reveal yourself to be morally bankrupt. What kind of reasoning is this? What kind of *anthropology* is this?

In the spirit of solidarity with Palestinians, in the spirit of robust citizenship in our own countries, and in the spirit of anthropology, we invite you to join us on the two-fold path outlined here. Don’t just boycott colleagues for show, or as a band-aid for your conscience, especially when [the very colleagues we would boycott are eager to join us and stand together in common cause](#). Instead, let’s get up and do something we can all agree

on: Let's join together in demanding that the U.S. government cut the purse-strings. Rather than attacking the sacred value of academic freedom, let's exert the sort of political and financial pressure that will leave Israel's increasingly paranoid, obstinate, and short-sighted leaders no choice but to take the step we all agree is vital: end the occupation.

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If you would like to add your name to a public list of signatories, send an email to 2016AAVote@gmail.com.

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