

Not So Simple: Reflections on the Academic Boycott on Israel

Uri Hadar
Department of Psychology
Tel Aviv University

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In the culture in which I have been brought up, in the language that mediated this culture, “boycott” had a distinctly negative connotation. It has been usually associated with a moralistic punishment directed towards an individual or a group who have transgressed a norm without, perhaps, actually breaking the law. Admittedly, boycott was opposed to a bare use of physical power, it acted in the name of morality, but it always anchored itself in a norm. It was, in that precise sense, never on the radical side of culture. In addition, the Hebrew for boycott- /herem/- like its Arabic cousin- /haram/- may associate with a whole range of moral punishments (the Arabic word stresses sanctity), but its verbal form- /leahrim/- stands explicitly for material dispossession, usually of forbidden goods (the Arabic word connects to this theme by deriving theft and stealing). It thus espouses a morality that is associated with property rights rather than human solidarity.

The instances of boycott that came to my mind in thinking up this commentary were those of the excommunication by the Jewish community of Amsterdam of Spinoza and his less known immediate predecessor- Uriel Acosta- who engraved himself on my teenage memory by carrying my first name (as well as by his ambivalent character and tragic end). Then there were all kinds of cultural bans of books and people by oppressive or blind regimes. The economic sanction of Iraq by the US-led coalition brought me to the present time-frame, but did not score much better for emotional valence. Of course, there was the boycott of South Africa, remarkable for both reason and impact, but I doubt that it changes the general ambience of either the word or the concept. Boycott was still essentially blind and moralistic, but the SA episode suffices to make the point that there may be historical conditions that warrant a boycott, unpleasant as it may be. The question is whether the current situation in Israel-Palestine is of such a nature and if it is- whether the specific form that calls for an academic boycott, in the absence of a wider economic and cultural boycott, is supportable.

It is, to my mind, a cognitive travesty to endeavor to completely answer the general question of which conditions warrant a boycott. It involves a measuring of suffering for which I lack the emotional tools. My perception of the occupation is that the conditions that Israel imposes on millions of Palestinians, with no basic human and civil rights, in extreme economic degradation and with persistent killing of innocent people justify a boycott. They justify a statement by the civilized world of its utter condemnation of these imperturbable Israeli practices, continuing now for over 35 years. Those who will necessarily suffer from the boycott, the Israeli people, have repeatedly and democratically decided to perpetrate the occupation: we have honestly earned whatever consequences may befall us in this respect (although there will be some thousands in the

position of innocent bystanders). In addition, the international community has repeatedly asserted that the Israeli occupation violates its norms.

A complete commercial and economic boycott can be very effective in bringing Israel into line with these international norms. Israel's economy is all but dependent on external economies, especially that of the USA, and Israeli public opinion would probably not allow a serious regression of material living conditions. Alas, in the crucial discourse of American politics, the idea of a ban on trade with Israel is inconceivable. It is, of course, doubtful that mainstream American political thinking will ever view the Israeli occupation in ways that could lead to a general boycott. According to some, the occupation is essentially a testing ground for strategies of regional domination that the USA is interested in developing, rather than ending. Therefore, as far as one can see, the boycott enterprise can only hope to disseminate a moral message, express a moral distaste with Israeli occupation, rather than be physically effective. I believe it is against this background that the academic boycott needs to be considered. The first question that arises here is why single out Israeli academia as the target of a boycott? After all, the most obvious targets for a moral condemnation are those institutions that are more directly involved with the machinery of Israeli oppression of Palestinians: the army, the forces of internal security, governmental ministries, etc. However, since the call for a boycott comes from academic and arts circles, it can not be effectively exercised against governmental institutions. They (we) have few dealings with those institutions and such boycotting would be void of practical delivery. Generally, it makes sense to promote those forms of action that best realize the potential of international academia to have an impact. But even this principle has to target institutions that can be seen to connect with the Israeli machinery of oppression. It makes no sense to earmark for boycotting Israeli hospitals or social services, for example. So, here we face the crucial question regarding the academic boycott: Can Israeli academia be seen to be tied up with the oppressive Israeli machinery with sufficient clarity to warrant the call for a boycott? The answer to this is not simple.

The army has its obvious links with academia. Firstly, almost every university has a department or an institute of strategic studies, where detailed research is conducted into diverse military matters, much of which is used by the army. However, strategic studies and military history are recognized and legitimate academic disciplines and it requires some extra arguments to condemn these enterprises. Of course, if one could show that the army influences the directions of research in these programs, directly or indirectly, that would be very pertinent to our object here, but I am not aware of any study that took up this case with any detail. Secondly, some academic research is funded by the ministry of defense. I do not know the extent of this and have a feeling that it is much more extensive than what we can readily see. Again, I think that the investigation of this matter is an important undertaking, but I am not aware of this having been done. Still, consider the research I know of, say, into the mechanisms and epidemiology of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). Is its funding by the ministry of defense ethically problematic? Should conscientious researchers refuse such funding? Or is it only research that is more directly related to military operational capacity that should be condemned or boycotted and then, irrespective of how it is funded? Thirdly, it is of much importance here to consider more

generally the role that academia plays in the militarization of Israeli culture. This issue has many more facets than I can hope to examine, but let me look at the extent to which high-ranking military people are in decision-making positions with regard to higher education and, therefore, have the ability to promote the status of those who are dear to them. Compared to national and municipal politics, as well as to business and industry, which is saturated by high ranking officers (perhaps with the exclusion of the banking and legal sectors), the universities are effectively officers-free. This probably does not result from a determination on the part of academia to remain free of military influence, but still, few other establishments that channel power in Israel are as free of military influence as are the universities. This point is not self evident and does not originate only in career structures. Currently the government pursues a very aggressive program of restructuring university management. The running proposals are that all appointments from the level of deans upward would be totally controlled by governing bodies that have a clear majority of non-academic personnel (say, civil servants). If successful- which they may well be- these changes will open up universities to an unprecedented level of influence of politicians and the military (whose long-term impact is downright frightening).

In Israel, like everywhere else, the academy provides considerable professional support for governmental institutions, especially legal, educational, diplomatic and economic institutions (incidentally, again, the ministry of defense is virtually professor-free). While I doubt that in Israel the level of engagement of academic personnel in governmental projects exceeds what is considered normal in the industrialized world, this involvement may nevertheless provide the ultimate argument in favor of the academic boycott. Universities are an inherent part of a state's power structure and as such the evils of the state policies, in turn, project back on to them. The only way in which academics can steer clear of such projection is by actively resisting the evils of their state power. To me this is a basic principle of academic morality, if there is such a thing. Academics have considerable benefits from their share in state power: A fine working environment, a reasonable and secure income, privileged pension schemes, tenures, privileged access to the media, etc. *The only way in which they can extricate themselves from the evils of state power is to actively resist it.* But does the Israeli academia take on this imperative? Again, the answer is not simple.

Let me start from an illustration of academic contribution to the evils of Israeli occupation that is probably the most baffling of which I am aware. It is so saturated with paradoxes that even its description is conceptually taxing. It features a well known Israeli philosopher, a logician by training and reputation, who was, and for all I know, still is, against the Israeli occupation. Yet, he has been pivotal in writing the ultimate text that serves to render military practices morally kosher, a text known as the army's ethical code. In promoting and popularizing the ethical code, he gives soldiers advice (in various media) on when it is and when it is not ethical to open fire on human targets. He develops semi-philosophical arguments in favor of targeted killings of Palestinians and tries to formalize the ethically affordable level of injury to innocent bystanders. Here a lack of active resistance to state power is, to my mind, taken to its limits and beyond. Space limitations do not allow me to bring more examples here, so let me just formulate the

following cautious statement: Israeli campuses have so far been remarkably quiet, not only with regard to the occupation, the violation of civil rights in the territories, the economic and human degradation of Palestinians, etc., but also regarding the persistent undermining of Palestinian higher education. This is particularly poignant considering that the Roses' petition in support of the academic boycott has stirred hundreds of Israeli academics to write angry letters to their colleagues and sign a counter petition on the pretext that the boycott violates academic freedom... So marked was the absence of an academic voice against the occupation, that the drive to mobilize academics towards such activities called itself "The Campus is not Silent". Not that there is no activity on the campuses- in fact there is quite a lot of it, be it meetings, demonstrations, petitions, lectures and debates- but it remains within the confines of a small margin (the majority of faculty and students have no idea about these activities and many have not heard at all of "The Campus is not Silent". Silence, it seems, can take its own subversive measures).

Yet, viewed from the angle of those anti-occupation activities that take place on a day-to-day basis in Israel- marginal as they may be- academics play a central role in them. They take leading positions in such organizations as Checkpoint Watch, Ta'ayush, Betsalem, and others. And perhaps most remarkably, they offer the widest and most consistent support for the most radical resistance movement in the Jewish community, namely, the refusal of military service in the occupied territories. A couple of years ago, about 350 faculty signed the letter in support of selective objection (facing the call for legal action against them by the minister of education). This level of support is far from being state shattering, but it is also far from leaving the task of resistance to a numbered few (as these numbered few sometimes hasten to claim). Many departmental sectors in Israeli universities- notably, in my perception, those of philosophy, linguistics, mathematics (!), history, psychology, various arts and cultural studies – breed a considerable level of anti-occupation activism. Again, none of this is terribly remarkable, but it suffices to make me feel that I can not support an academic boycott that is not qualified in a serious manner. Qualified in the sense that it is 1- well researched and argued (as suggested above), 2- selective and targets those sectors of the academy that are most directly connected with either Israeli state power or symbols of that power (hi-tech research is what comes to my mind) and 3- responsive to and able to make allowances for anti-occupation activity within or by the academy. Only a call for an academic boycott that would be detailed in this manner stands a chance, to my mind, of circumventing the inherent blindnesses of boycotting.

Finally, I wish to note the special considerations that face the Israeli activist in publicly supporting the academic boycott. Many of her fellow activists will be especially sensitive and resistant to this idea. When the 1st FFIPP conference against the occupation (see www.ffipp.org) proposed to (academically) discuss the academic boycott, this sufficed to stir an angry reaction from within the circles of "The Campus is not Silent". Some colleagues had decided not to attend the conference because of that. Public support for the boycott will alienate many fellow activists and put obstacles in the wheels of anti-occupation activities. In these days, when demonstrators against the separation wall are being shot at with live ammunition by Israeli soldiers, the Israeli activist must ask herself

whether the academic boycott enterprise is of such a high priority as to risk the weakening of other crucial and urgent activities.