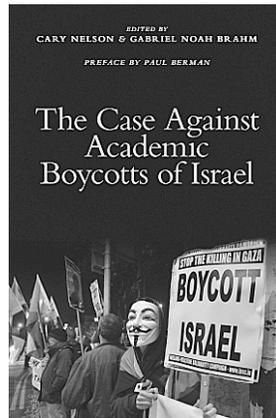


## Worth the Wait



Cary Nelson and Gabriel Brahm's (eds.)  
*The Case Against Academic Boycotts of Israel*  
(MLA Members for Scholars' Rights, 2015). 552 pp. \$35 paper

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Let us recall Andrea Lim's anthology *The Case for Sanctions against Israel* (Verso, 2012) justifying a boycott of all things Israeli. That compilation included a wide array of writers—many of them Jewish, such as *Shock Doctrine*'s Naomi Klein, but all holding similar sentiment of anti-Zionist beliefs, and with a closing word by BDS co-founder Omar Barghouti. The book's lead chapter is written by physician activist relative Mustafa Barghouti (his cousin, Intifada leader Marwan Barghouti, was unavailable because he was completing five lifetime sentences for killing Israeli Jews). Mustafa Barghouti's chapter addressed a litany of Israeli military abuses, went on align himself with Nelson Mandela and Martin Luther King (probably not the best choices, as both leaders had made past pro-Zionist statements) and ended the chapter with a call to resist the Occupation and its racist, colonial history exploiting the region's resources and people—though they would be the British, not the Israelis.

But no matter. For Dr. Barghouti and BDS supporters, the last millennia of Arab-led pogroms and destruction of the region's Jews is better left unsaid. Instead, all violence toward Jews is justified and minimized, as the reader is asked to put in perspective that "90 percent of the Palestinian struggle has been non-violent" (5). Of course, this man of science does not provide any supporting evidence, since he knows that none exists. BDS

supporters do not want to hear statistics or trust Western history; they want to listen to the suffering, the good and honest ones not swayed by politics. Forget that some Palestinians—e.g., the Barghoutis—are well to do, well connected and educated, and have benefitted from the system: Omar Barghouti is a PhD candidate at Tel Aviv University.

But the whole family is good at sticking it to the Jews whenever possible, as in Mustafa's 2009 bid to court Christians and de-Judanize Christianity's messiah—"We always remember that Jesus was the first Palestinian who was tortured in this land."

Avoided as well in Lim's anthology and BDS ideology are ANY references to Arab intransigence and intolerance of their dhimmis; Arab identity politics and the problem of creating Palestinian history prior to the 20th century; the incivility of Palestinian violations by Palestinians; Palestinian aggression toward other Arabs; Arab-led retaliatory massacres (e.g., Black September, 1970); United Nations Relief and Works Agency's policy of refugee neglect; the ongoing condemnation and continual sanctioning against Israel in the UN by the 57-nation Islamic States bloc; cultural revisionism and appropriation of Jewish antiquities (e.g., Rachel's Tomb); supremacist ideology, antisemitic legislation, discrimination and massacres (e.g., Hebron, Jaffa, Hadassah Hospital, Hebrew University); Nazi ties to Palestinian muftis; mass anti-Jewish expulsions; denial or refusal of Jewish statehood; textbooks devoid of Israel for Palestinian children; geographic maps citing Israeli cities as Palestinian; major surveys consistently recording the world's highest antisemitism rates, antisemitic media, propaganda, popular songs ("I Hate Israel")—it's a formidable list, and this is not all of it.

BDS and the pro-Palestinian proponents have long benefitted from their relabeling as human rights victims and champions of peace. As victims, concepts such as media savvy, political and propaganda campaigns, or concepts such as Taqiyya (permissible lying to non-believers) are lost on the Western mind. Finally, in 2014, countering voices began to appear: Jed Babbin's *The BDS War Against Israel* (CreateSpace) and Rani Urabi Mustafa's *A Century of Arab Wrongs* (Amazon Digital) These two books were released early in the year and are small and self-published. Babbin's work provides a good general overview of BDS's underbelly, including NGO funding, while Rani Mustafa's book is biographical, documenting his transition from son of a PLO senator to ardent Zionist Palestinian. Both have their place. But anti-BDS advocates were left longing for something more, something more detailed, more comprehensive to counter the toxicity of anti-Zionism on campus.

In *The Case Against Academic Boycotts of Israel*, Cary Nelson and Gabriel Brahm have compiled a work that is worth the wait and worthy of

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accolades. I predict that this book will become the primary resource and sourcebook on anti-BDS thinking; the *Journal for the Study of Antisemitism* has nominated it for at least one Best Book award. The scholarship is laudatory, covering the timely topics of “lawfare,” biased media reporting, doctored photos, political Islam, coopted human rights, antisemitism, and the delegitimizing of the Jewish state. The message is clear: while some who join BDS do so with good intentions, accepting the one-sided arguments and cover stories as the truth, the movement organizers and most anti-Zionism foot soldiers continue in the service of a *judenfrei* Middle East.

Niall Carson’s eerie photo of Irish BDS protesters blocking the Israeli embassy speaks the proverbial thousand words. Carson’s photo literally focuses on one protestor wearing a caricature mask of designer John Galliano. Known for au courant fashion, Galliano’s highly publicized antisemitic tirade at a Paris pub became au courant as well, making one wonder what John Galliano’s likeness is doing at a Dublin BDS protest. The short answer is because it works—a message for all John Galliano “wannabes” to join in the effort to fight with those who stand up to global oppression.

Then there is the preface by *New Republic* senior editor Paul Berman. Berman offers a quick overview of boycotts against the Jews beginning with the 1920s blocking of Jewish refugees by Arabs and successive anti-Israeli campaigns. He foreshadows the book’s arguments by providing a brief vignette of boycotters vs. anti-boycotters and their critics.

The book is divided into four main topics, with a fifth as an historical overview: Section I, principles and motives; Section II, analysis of the American Studies Association (ASA) vote; Section III, the co-opting of the progressives; Section IV, Israeli context and history; and finally the overview. The actual boycott resolutions are listed, as are the current online resources both pro and anti-BDS. An introduction by co-editor Cary Nelson, affording a solid overview of BDS, Israel Apartheid Week, and the BDS-allied Students for Justice in Palestine, is also worth the read; recall that the latter is this oxymoronic-titled group whose justice involved beating up a Jewish student at Temple University in September 2014. The reader will appreciate the essays by the book’s co-editors, SPME executive director Asaf Romirowsky, SPME executive director, and Emily Budick, chair of American Studies at Jerusalem University.

University of Chicago law professor Martha Nussbaum’s well-received “Against Academic Boycotts” essay leads Section I, with Russell A. Berman’s strong arguments to follow. They are juxtaposed with the AAUP statement “On Academic Boycotts” reprinted at the top, perhaps serving as a reminder of an association’s ideals.

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Unfortunately, not all associations are equal or remain true to their ideas. Section II attempts to explain how and why the American Studies Association (ASA) voted to boycott and support BDS. The politics of endorsement and exploration of the ASA's ugly underbelly is examined extensively by *Engage* founder David Hirsch, followed by equally impressive critiques from Sharon Ann Musher, Donna Devine, and Michael Bérubé who all make points worth remembering.



*BDS at Toronto's York University, March 2013*

Section III gets to the heart of the BDS involvement and attempts to influence hiring and firing practices of the political pariah—Israeli professors and related Israeli researchers and the journals who would publish them. Along with Cary Nelson's indictment of the Left lies Mitchell Cohen's key essay, "Antisemitism and the Left that Doesn't Learn," reminiscent of Steve Cohen's 1984 classic, *That's Funny, You Don't Look Anti-Semitic*. Nancy Koppleman considers social justice gone amuck and Sam and Carol Edelman offer sound solutions. David Caplan's "Imaginary Jews" analyzes antisemitic tropes, poetry; and literary themes, reminding us that in a time of crisis art cannot be a luxury—and when have Jews resided in an era devoid of antisemitism and crisis?

Part IV seeks to place Israel into context by offering the reader an Israeli perspective ranging in topics from higher education and the Israeli BDS (Ilan Troen), bi-nationalism and transnationalism (Rachel Fish, Shira Wolosky), to Arab-Hebrew identity analysis seen through the eyes of fiction writing (Rachel Harris).

The chapters are all strong, but for my taste, Alan Johnson's concept of intellectual incitement (to hate), Richard Landes's linking of Jihad to the political Left and Christian eschatology, and Ken Marcus's thoughts on the key question "Is the Boycott Movement Antisemitism" are laudable.

Some rearranging requests. MLA voter observations by Michael Kotzin and Jeff Robbins should have merited inclusion in Section II, as their

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story is not dissimilar from the AAUP's or British counterpart Ronnie Fraser. Tammi Rossman-Bejamin has a similar experience, and while bringing her empirical analysis of would-be boycotters is an important contribution, I would have rather read about her struggle against the tidal wave of anti-Zionism at the University of California.

As the quoted excerpt below from the book indicates, Robert Fine's "Speaking in Opposition" presentation at Leeds University in March 2014 is along these lines. Fine begins recalling protest against apartheid in his youth, but rejects any parallels, quickly reminding the audience that:

It is as discriminatory to boycott any academic institutions or any academics on the basis of nationality as it would be to boycott on the basis of race, religion or gender. This would be true not only of Israel but of any other country. . . . A selective academic boycott aimed only at Israeli academic institutions, and not at universities and research institutes belonging to other countries with equally bad or far worse records of human rights abuse, is also discriminatory. . . . We should be able to agree that antisemitism is, like any other racism, something that progressive movements must be against. In my union, UCU, proponents of an academic boycott of Israel always couple their calls with more or less categorical declarations that criticism of Israel is not or not "as such" antisemitic. Supporters of BDS in the States declare categorically that the charge of "antisemitism," when leveled against them or other critics of Israel, is not only mistaken but also raised for dishonest reasons. I have often heard it said—look for example at Alain Badiou's recent polemics on antisemitism—that while antisemitism was a real problem in the past, it is no longer a problem of the present and has now been converted into a mere ideology of Zionism. What I see is a disturbing reluctance on the part of proponents of boycott to take seriously the problem of antisemitism. To reduce concern over antisemitism to a way of censoring critical thought about Israel is insulting to those of us who are concerned about antisemitism and have no wish to censor critical thought. We should surely understand by now that it is racism and antisemitism, not opposition to racism and antisemitism, which constitute the restriction of free speech. . . . as a moral obligation we ought to honor post-MacPherson to take very seriously the fear that the academic boycott encourages antisemitism because its effect is to exclude Jews and only Jews from the global community of academe.

I am not against all boycotts, but I am against an academic boycott linked to a political doctrine that treats Zionism as a dirty word. Zionism is a kind of nationalism. Like other nationalisms it has many faces—at times socialist, emancipatory, in search of refuge from horror; at other times narrow, chauvinistic, exclusive and terroristic. It depends which face we touch. For most Jews, Zionism simply means commitment to the existence of a Jewish state and is compatible with a plurality of political views. . . . What I object to is heaping onto "Zionism" all the wrongs of

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nationalism in general, as if this nationalism were all bad while other nationalisms are off our critical hook. It is deeply regressive to turn “Zionism” into an abstraction—abstracted from history (the Holocaust in Europe), abstracted from politics (conflict over land with Arab countries and Palestinians), and abstracted from society (including the exclusion of most Jews from Middle East and Maghreb societies). It seems to me that there is some line of continuity between the abstraction of “Zionism” today and the abstraction of “the Jews” in the past.

The argument is put forward that Palestinian civil society has called for a blanket boycott of Israeli academic institutions. There is an empirical question concerning how true this is—to the chagrin of BDS, this call is not supported by Mahmoud Abbas and the Palestinian Authority—but the more fundamental problem is present in the idea that Palestinian civil society is one homogenous bloc with one opinion . . . Israel looks more like David when compared with other state powers. There is something very disturbing in the totalizing images of Zionist power associated with the boycott movement and the innocent vision of peace and harmony that will prevail once this power is broken. Closer to home, this self-same image of Zionist power manifests itself in the repeated refrain of resisting intimidation from advocates of the boycott.

. . . we in Europe must face up to our particular responsibility not to project onto one side or the other all the sins of racism, imperialism, ethnic cleansing and genocide of which Europe itself has been so very guilty. The boycott of Israeli academic institutions is by contrast the tip of a reactive and regressive political turn (465-470).

In conclusion, co-editor Nelson, alongside Rachel Harris and Kenneth Stein, offer their solid overview, “The History of Israel,” which could be subtitled “Everything BDS does not want you to know and keeps you distracted so as not to ask.” At 55 pages, it is the book’s largest chapter. Given the political complexities of the Middle East, it may well be concise for all its length—yet for the reader, it is too much too late. If past is prologue, then a simple solution is to literally make this gem the prologue.

Who will dislike the book? The Corey Robins, David Lloyds, David Palumbo-Lius, Barghoutis, approving reviewers of *Mondoweiss* and *The Electronic Intifada*, and so on. Everyone else will find merit hearing anti-BDS arguments for the first time.

The essays in this compilation are both timely and timeless. Perhaps the timelessness has to do with antisemitism’s enduring nature, but there is an *unheimlich* or uncanny quality to them as well—like knowing that I could be writing the same words circa 1930s, from a café in Berlin, and understanding that BDS is the latest but not last incarnation.

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