

**Jon Haber**

## **The Case Against Academic Boycotts of Israel**

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I've just finished reading [\*The Case Against Academic Boycotts of Israel\*](#), a book of essays edited by Cary Nelson, former President of the American Association of University Professors (AAUP), and Professor Gabriel Noah Brahm of Northern Michigan University, both veterans of recent boycott wars within academia and contributors to this remarkable volume.

Before getting into content, I wanted to first highlight the publishing achievement regarding getting a book of such quality out the door in the brief time between the ASA/MLA BDS fights earlier in the year and last month when the title must have started rolling off the presses. Quick-to-print publishing is nothing new, but getting a polished, well-written-and-edited, academic volume like *The Case Against Academic Boycotts of Israel* (published by [MLA Members for Scholars' Rights](#) and distributed by Wayne State University Press) completed in a matter of months demonstrates what can be done when dedicated (and genuine) scholars take advantage of modern publishing technology.

Moving onto content, the book is broken into six sections and many contributors (and some essays published as articles earlier in the year) will be familiar to those who have followed BDS overreach within academic associations in 2014.

In the first section, titled "Opposing Boycotts as a Matter of Principle," contributors (including Nelson and Brahm, Martha Nussbaum, Russell Berman and others) make the case for why boycotting academia is wrong under any circumstances. The arguments supporting this assertion are varied and powerful, but if forced to pick a favorite, I'd probably go with Cary Nelson's "The Fragility of Academic Freedom."

In that article, the author traces the emergence of the concept we now

call “academic freedom,” highlighting its evolution as a human and social construct, rather than a natural law waiting to be discovered. For if you stop and think about it, why should scholars – alone among professionals – be entitled to not just lifetime employment contracts (i.e., tenure), but the right to do and say what they please with minimum fear of professional reprisal? It’s because individuals and organizations (especially the AAUP that Nelson previously led) fought for these rights and, just as importantly, convinced the non-academic public that the importance of scholarly work necessitated such benefits and protections.

But if such a social norm is predicated on the virtue of scholars having uninhibited access to ideas (and other scholars), what becomes of the academic freedom construct if academics themselves throw it away to support some transient pet political cause? That’s just what the irresponsible academics leading the American Studies Association (ASA) did last winter (even as they insisted they were doing nothing of the kind) and it remains to be seen how social norms might change again once the lesson ASA taught (that politics *can* trump academic freedom – at least for them) seeps out into wider public consciousness.

Speaking of the American Studies Association, their boycott is the specific subject of the second section of the book, and readers can probably guess why I favorited Sharon Ann Musher’s piece “The Closing of the American Studies Association’s Mind,” which provides a blow-by-blow, detailed description of the unscholarly, unfair and unbelievable way the leadership of ASA forced a boycott onto the organization they led, damaging their association (if not their field) while remaining personally protected behind the blast shield of tenure.

The most politically contentious essays can be found in a third section entitled “The BDS Movement, the Left and American Culture” which makes a broader case regarding what the ASA boycott and Modern Languages Association’s (MLA’s) recent anti-Israel votes say about an academic culture where anti-Israel invective has become the norm. While Tammi Rossman-Benjamin “names names” regarding where the loci of anti-Israel activity can be found on campuses (normally within social sciences departments) and Kenneth Marcus

and Richard Landes do their usual masterful job exposing the irrational psychology behind ever-escalating Israel hatred on campuses, the piece that impacted me most was Samuel M. Edelman and Carol F S. Edelman's "When Failure Succeeds: Divestment and Deligitimization."

In that essay, the Edelmanns point out how seemingly trivial matters (like meaningless student government divestment votes rejected by school administrators before they are even brought up) provide a channel whereby endless propagandizing creates an environment in which students come to accept as natural the assumption that Israel is a ghastly place (even if it might not deserve to have its scholars boycotted). Having spent several years exposing the failure and fraud behind the BDS "movement," it's become too easy to treat the BDSers' shouts and viciousness as a form of temper tantrum from spoiled children not getting their way. But as "When Failure Succeeds" points out, we all need to take far more seriously the boycotters' unstated mission to endlessly pump sludge into the minds of the young.

In the fourth section, "The Israeli Context," authors like Shira Wolosky and Rachel Fish contextualize academic boycotts within the framework of historic anti-Israel activity and political fads (like calls for a "bi-national state") that are constantly resuscitated as fresh, new ideas in both academic and political settings. While each of these pieces (like every other essay in the book) is a must read, the pragmatist in me gravitated towards Ilan Troen's "The Israel-Palestinian Relationship in Higher Education: Evidence from the Field" which dismantles every trumped-up charge that make up the case for an academic boycott of Israel.

A fifty-page "Concise History of Israel," "A Boycott Dossier" (that includes first-hand documents relating to academic boycott activity) and a list of online resources (both pro- and anti-BDS) closes out the volume, and while the history lesson will seem a little 101 for those familiar with the story of Israel and the Middle East, it seems like a wise move to provide a factual framework to those who may have only been exposed to the BDSers' dystopian fantasies about the region. The most obvious criticism of a work such as *The Case Against the Academic Boycott of Israel* is that making BDS the subject of

academic inquiry might seem like the equivalent of bringing a legal brief to a knife fight. That's actually an image that came to mind when I read Donna Robinson Divine piece in the book entitled "The Boycott Debate at Smith" where she describes one set of professors defending the anti-boycott stance taken by the school's president by utilizing many of the subtle arguments found in Nelson and Brahm's book while professors critical of Israel fell back on sloganeering and discredited maps to pump a far less subtle (and non-true) message into the minds of students.

But for reasons most *Divest This* regulars can guess, I can think of no substitute for the kind of scaffolding provided by a strong intellectual framework for the fight against BDS, even if works like *The Case Against Academic Boycotts of Israel* don't come with a kit that includes pithy slogans, catchy chants or evocative poster images that students can bring into the next pro- or anti-Israel rally or event. Going back to an earlier case of immunization against the BDS virus, one of the reasons boycotts are no longer part of the BDS repertoire at food cooperatives is that the people who ran one such a coop (in Davis California) laid out a case against boycotts that demonstrated them to be in violation of the founding principles of the coop movement itself. And while such an historic argument might seem "academic," it provided every group fighting coop boycotts after that the grounding and ammunition they needed to drive BDS out of their communities.

Now BDS and the attitudes supporting it are far more entrenched at all levels of the academy, even if support for an anti-Israel agenda has yet to transcend a noisy and increasingly aggressive minority. But if un-blinkered students and professors (who still make up the majority at all schools, even if they might lack the conviction of Israel's defamers) are ever to make progress, they need to base their choices of action on a bedrock of ideas, including the powerful and compelling ideas that can be found on every page of *The Case Against Academic Boycotts of Israel*.