

# *Unjust, unhelpful: arguments against the academic boycott of Israel*

David Hirsh

I am reluctant to write this article because it should not be necessary. No antiracist and no scholar should need the case to be explicitly set out against a campaign to exclude Israelis from the cultural and economic life of humanity; especially from the global academic community. There is no campaign to exclude anybody else; only Israelis. That a reputable scholarly journal feels it has to commission an article giving reasons why such an exclusion is a bad idea should tell us something worrying about the depth and scope of contemporary anti-Semitism.

There are a number of reasons to oppose a boycott of Israeli academia and I will, in spite of my reluctance, set them out as clearly as I can in this article. But for me, the central reason, and in fact the reason behind the other reasons, concerns anti-Semitism. The actual intentions of people who support this boycott are positive and antiracist; they want to help Palestinians. But were it to be instituted the boycott would be in effect if not intent an antisemitic measure; it would normalise an exclusive focus on Jews as fit targets for exclusion and punishment.

To be quite clear, I am saying that it would be better if this debate was not happening; it is not a legitimate debate. I am well aware that I will be accused of being part of a powerful 'Israel lobby' which dishonestly 'plays the anti-Semitism card' in order to de-legitimize criticism of Israeli human rights abuses. I want anti-Semitism to remain unthinkable and so I am becoming accustomed to the charge of violating freedom of thought. But people are more and more seeing through the lazy claim that those who raise the issue of contemporary anti-Semitism do so for instrumental reasons. [1] In truth the libel that Jews aim to benefit instrumentally from anti-Semitism is an old one, classically articulated in the ninth of the Protocols of the Elders of Zion.

Why should I overcome my reluctance to debate the pros and cons of excluding Israelis? If there were a proposal to exclude women from universities on the basis that their natural aptitude to science was inferior to that of men, then academic journals would not take it seriously by hosting a debate on the proposal. If I were asked to rebut such a proposal, I would refuse, on the basis that there is no debate

to be had; it is indisputable fact that women are as intellectually competent as men. A debate on the issue of women's equality, I would argue, would normalize the argument that women are unequal and would therefore be positively damaging. Another example of a debate which we should avoid having is whether or not the Holocaust happened. Holocaust deniers are keen to debate with historians so that they can present their racist discourse as one side of a legitimate debate. Historians refuse to debate with Holocaust deniers for that reason and because there is no debate to be had. The debate in itself functions as a legitimization of racist views.

However, imagine a situation where serious people did believe that women were essentially inferior or where serious people believed that the Holocaust was a myth generated by a Zionist lobby. In that case, we would be forced to take part in these debates, to present the evidence against the bigots, and to show that they were wrong. The harm done by legitimizing the debate would be outweighed by the good of winning the debate.

So, we are in a situation where serious people are seduced by a proposal to exclude Israelis from university campuses. I will first explain how I think the boycott campaign, and the politics of demonization which lie behind it, relate to anti-Semitism. I will then set out other arguments against boycotting Israeli scholars.

One final precursor is a short discussion concerning what is meant by a boycott of Israeli academia. It will be said that I have already misrepresented the boycott campaign by characterizing it as an attempt to exclude Israelis from our campuses and our conferences, from our journals and our libraries. The boycott campaign says that it proposes a victimless boycott of institutions. In truth the rhetoric of the boycotters on this question has changed and evolved as it has encountered opposition to each articulation. In 2002 Mona Baker fired two Israelis from the editorial boards of her academic journals. Gideon Toury and Miriam Shlesinger are both well respected as scholars and also as opponents of Israeli human rights abuses, but nevertheless they were 'boycotted.' In 2003, the proposal to the Association of University Teachers (AUT) was that members should 'sever any academic links they may have with official Israeli institutions, including universities.' The same year Andrew Wilkie rejected an Israeli who applied to do a PhD with him at Oxford on the pretext that he had served in the Israeli forces. In 2005 the boycott campaign called for the AUT to boycott particular Israeli universities. In 2006 the other British academic union, NATFHE, called for a boycott of Israeli scholars who failed to 'publicly dissociate themselves' from 'Israel's apartheid policies.' In

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2007 the new merged academic union, the UCU, reverted from the proposal for a McCarthyite political test back to the 'institutional' formulation. Three anecdotes just from my own experience: a colleague asked me if it was legitimate that another colleague had invited an Israeli scholar to speak at our college; a colleague asked me if his reputation would be harmed if he visited the West Bank even in the company of anti-occupation Israeli scholars; a colleague refused to discuss his academic work with a scholar who works at an Israeli university until he had answered questions about his own attitude to the 'apartheid state' in which he lived. These examples all demonstrate the ways in which a boycott of Israeli institutions really amounts to the political interrogation, stigmatization and exclusion of Israeli academics. Universities are not buildings or administrations, they are academics and students; academic research gets done by human beings; papers are written by people; research is carried out by researchers. Some have argued that an Israeli scholar would be disallowed from submitting a paper to a journal if she refused formally to disavow her institution. In this way the political test would morph into an institutional test but would remain substantially similar.

No, say the boycotters, we don't want to exclude all Israelis, but only people who work at Israeli institutions. To rely on this distinction would be to insist that the only way for an Israeli academic to be legitimate would be to live outside Israel. We are discussing an exclusion of Israelis.

A significant proportion of the world's Jewish academics work in Israel. Many more, disproportionately, have links to Israeli institutions. Jews are more likely to be involved in Jewish, Israeli or Middle East studies and would therefore be isolated from important centres of their discipline. Jews in other fields are more likely to have links with Israeli colleagues. Jews are more likely to manufacture institutional links with Israel in order to demonstrate their opposition to a boycott. It is normal practice for institutions to carry out impact assessment of policy changes with respect to equal opportunities. Any impact assessment of a boycott of Israel would find that in a whole number of distinct ways, it would disadvantage Jews much more than others. In this sense then, already we can see that an academic boycott of Israel would be institutionally antisemitic. The boycotters may argue that it is nevertheless right – Jews should suffer disproportionately for Jewish crimes. But then they should defend rather than deny the antisemitic effect of their proposal. While the boycott would not exclude every Israeli or every Jew, it certainly would exclude Israelis and Jews. The idea of institutional racism, of a racism which is not

intended but which is nevertheless a predictable result of particular policies or practices, is hardly new to antiracists.

My argument about anti-Semitism is not an *ad hominem* argument. I do not say that people who support a boycott of Israel are really motivated by an underlying hatred of Jews – either secret or unconscious. I do not say that exaggerated hostility to Israel is a *result* of an ahistorical, cultural or permanent anti-Semitism. In my view the relationship is actually the other way round. The exaggerated hostility to Israel comes first, the normalization of antisemitic ways of thinking follows, and concrete exclusions of Israelis and Jews follow next; this leads in turn to more hostility to Israel and to more normalization of hostility to Jews. I do not believe that it is common within the boycott campaign for people to be motivated by a conscious hatred of Jews. Mine is not an argument concerning malicious *intent*. I think the boycotters are motivated by a sense of anger and outrage at Israeli human rights abuses; a sense of anger and outrage that I share. Yet anti-Semitism can nevertheless be a result of good intentions and of righteous anger.

The boycott campaign portrays Israel as a unique fulcrum of global imperialism and as a uniquely racist state which is uniquely worthy of boycott. So where does the belief in Israel as a singular evil on the planet come from, if it does not come from an antisemitic antipathy to a Jewish collective project? Perhaps some people think that it is just true, that Israel is the most serious human rights abuser on the planet and that its academics should be held responsible. But in fact Israeli human rights abuses are far from unique. Many states occupy contested territory; many are responsible for much greater human rights abuses than is Israel. So how do we explain the sharp focus on Israeli human rights abuses and its frequent combination with a silence about the abundance of much greater human rights abuses elsewhere?

The Stalinist and post-Stalinist left inherits from a specific tradition of explicitly antisemitic anti-Zionism which was invented by the official ideologues of the Soviet Union. This ‘anti-imperialist’ antisemitic rhetoric was directed at Jews, most famously during the preparation for Doctors Plot show-trial in 1953. On 13 January 1953, Pravda ran a story under the headline: ‘Vicious Spies and Killers under the Mask of Academic Physicians.’ Pravda wrote that ‘Unmasking the gang of poisoner-doctors struck a blow against the international Jewish Zionist organization. Now all can see what sort of philanthropists and “friends of peace” hid beneath the sign-board of “Joint.”’ [2] The Communist Party in Poland organized a campaign against Jews in March 1968 by which they were coerced publicly to articulate

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their opposition to 'Zionism.' Many refused and were pushed out of Polish public and academic life; this was done in the name of the Palestinians, in the name of Communism, in the name of the left, and of anti-imperialism, barely twenty years after the Holocaust (Pankowski 2008).

The anti-Stalinist left, particularly those sections which identified as Trotskyist, encountered huge difficulties when faced with a post Second World War world in which Trotsky's revolutionary perspective had been defeated. Neither of the two possibilities which Trotsky foresaw had happened; the Soviet Union did not collapse, nor did the workers make a 'political revolution' against the 'bureaucracy.' In fact, the 'degenerated workers' state' came out of the war strengthened, and it replicated itself across a significant proportion of the world. Capitalism showed itself, also against expectations, to be hugely dynamic. The world seemed to find a third option that was neither socialism nor barbarism.

Some on the Trotskyist left remained for decades in a state of frenzy, convinced that this was the moment of the final crisis of capitalism and of state 'socialism.' Others eventually over-embraced the new situation and became convinced that the Soviet Union, Eastern Europe, and China were, after all, in spite of their evident failings, in some sense an advance on capitalism. By this route, many on the Trotskyist left managed to downplay their opposition to the Communist rulers in favour of defending the 'workers' states' against 'imperialism.' In this way Marxist politics, for some, was radically transformed. What started as a programme for the transformation of society became a programme of siding with 'progressive' states. Whereas classical internationalism was a programme of common struggle against capitalism, it now became a programme of taking sides against America in geopolitical power struggles. Later other options emerged: Cuba, Nicaragua, Venezuela. For some it didn't matter that the leaders of the good 'progressive' nations wore military uniforms, had secret police forces and ruled tyrannically, so long as there was some actually existing state to which they could attach their feelings of patriotism.

This phenomenon degenerated further for those who substituted 'victim nations' for 'good nations.' Nations thought to have socialist or progressive regimes were, some noticed, always opposed by imperialism, so some on the left began to support any regime which employed anti-imperialist rhetoric. In this way, some left-wing political currents turned themselves into apologists for Saddam Hussein, Slobodan

Milošević, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, Kim Jong-il and for the 'resistance movement' in Iraq.

Some people on the left in the 1950s had great hopes in Israel as a good nation and also sympathy for Israel as a victim nation. They began to wave its flag. It is sometimes these same people who have now swung round in disgust when it turns out that Israel is not a utopian beacon for mankind. Sections of the left are turning on Israel with a rage, a single-mindedness, and an enthusiasm explainable more readily by feelings of betrayal than by looking at the actual nature of the conflict between Israel and Palestine.

The willingness amongst sections of the left to find that Israel is a unique evil on the planet is not a result of anti-Semitism but is a symptom of the poverty and degeneration of much left-wing thinking in general. 'Anti-imperialism' during the Cold War often degenerated into a self-satisfied anti-Americanism which was increasingly expressed with a disdainful contempt not only for American democracy but also for American culture and for American people. American and bourgeois hypocrisy was often felt as being more repellent than Soviet crimes against humanity. Third world dictatorship was often felt to be much worse if it was backed by the US than if it was backed by Soviet imperialism. There was little appetite for outrage at Soviet hypocrisy.

Marx offered an analysis of exploitation which did not rely on a picture of the rich and the powerful conspiring greedily against the exploited. That was his genius. He offered a structural account of exploitation which was much more compelling than conspiracy theory. Some people on the left who forget Marx are left only with the conspiracy of bad people exploiting the oppressed. And from conspiracy theory it is one short tempting step to antisemitic conspiracy theory.

When Jews are involved in conflicts there is a danger that the ways people think about those conflicts get mystified in the language of anti-Semitism. There are real abuses of human rights committed by Israel; there is real racism in Israel; there is an illegitimate occupation; there is Jewish power. But the boycott campaign is not a reasonable response to the actual situation; it is a response to a mystified narrative of the actual situation. The human rights abuses are mystified as being genocidal like that of Nazism; institutional racism is mystified as being worse than apartheid; the occupation is mystified as being unique; Jewish power becomes an 'Israel lobby' capable of perverting the policy of the only superpower on the planet

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against its own interest. Left-wing portrayals of Israel as a unique evil on the planet are the result not of an underlying secret or unconscious anti-Semitism but of the particular post-war history of important currents of socialist thought (See Seymour 2007 & 2008).

An academic boycott, as we have seen, would impact disproportionately against Jews and so would be institutionally antisemitic. It is based on and encourages a world-view which puts Israel and Zionism at the centre of all that is threatening to the oppressed and to the left. Antisemitism has always put the Jews at the centre of the world. In truth, Jews and Israel are not central to anything. As well as being institutionally antisemitic in effect, the rhetoric of the boycott campaign treats Israel as a demonic entity rather than as a state and so opens the door to antisemitic thinking. 'Zionism' becomes an epithet of evil, an insult which denotes something whose destruction is necessary for things to get better in the world. Zionism is pictured as a totalitarian movement rather than as a complex and variegated nationalist movement which emerged from the pogroms of Russia, the gas ovens of Nazi Germany and the expulsions from the great cities of the Middle East.

Finally, in case there is still somebody reading this who is not yet convinced, I will outline the specific arguments against excluding Israelis from British campuses, laboratories, classrooms and publishers.

First a point of order. The boycott campaign positions itself as a passive response to a Palestinian call, in analogy with responses around the world to the ANC call to boycott apartheid South Africa. In truth, the current boycott campaign was initiated in April 2002 by Hilary and Steven Rose who called for a moratorium of European research collaboration with Israel. In 2005 Sue Blackwell claimed in *The Guardian* that her campaign would succeed because, unlike in 2003, she now had a 'clear call from Palestinians.' The academic boycott is not called for by any body which represents Palestine; not by the Palestinian Government nor by the leaders of Hamas nor by the PLO. It is called for by some trade unionists and by some civil society organizations. Some people in Palestine argue for an anti-normalization strategy, part of which is a call for an academic boycott, while others in Palestine argue for closer relations with Israelis which may lead towards a peace agreement. We, on the outside, should listen to the debates in Palestine respectfully but we should also use our own political judgment as to how we may intervene.

### (a) Academic Freedom

The standard liberal argument against a boycott of Israeli academia is based on the principle that such a boycott would violate the norms of academic freedom. Michael Yudkin (2007) articulates it thus:

The principle of the Universality of Science and Learning – that academics do not discriminate against colleagues on the basis of factors that are irrelevant to their academic work (such as race, religion, nationality etc.) – is well established and almost universally respected. To boycott academics by reason of their country of residence breaches this principle and harms the interests of the academics concerned.

Judith Butler (2006) argues that a liberal abstract notion of academic freedom is not sufficient to make sense of the boycott debate. While Palestinians may enjoy an abstract right to academic freedom, the material conditions necessary for the enjoyment of those rights do not exist under occupation. Steven Rose [3] has argued that Israelis are hypocritical to ‘squeal’ about their own academic freedom while the occupation continues to deny freedom to Palestinians. It is possible to respond to this by arbitrarily and artificially removing the academic freedom of Israelis, as punishment, in order to balance the situation, or in an effort to exert pressure on Israel to respect Palestinian freedom. Or it is possible to respond by campaigning against the occupation and against the material denials of academic freedom which come with it. Butler does not argue that abstract academic freedom may be ‘trumped’ by other more important rights, but the opposite; she argues that the principle of abstract freedom must be strengthened, deepened and made material by creating the conditions for its implementation.

The boycott campaign sees academic freedom in Israel as something which may be sacrificed for the greater good of ending the occupation. I would argue the opposite, following Butler: the concept of academic freedom is important in itself but it does not go far enough; a material conception of academic freedom is necessary which can go beyond the critique of the boycott to a fight for freedom in the West Bank. Academic freedom is not a principle which we should reject because sometimes it fails to deliver what it promises; rather, we should fight to hold it to its promise. Academic freedom is not something to be sacrificed in the struggle for more freedom; academic freedom is part of the struggle for freedom.

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### **(b) Damage to the union or the university which is to do the boycotting**

Howard Jacobson argues that the boycott, as a refusal to listen, would be a particular violation of the norms of scholarly life:

No longer to listen is no longer to engage in the dialogue of thought. Which disqualifies you as a scholar and a teacher, for what sort of example to his pupils is a teacher who covers truth's ears and buries it under stone. A university that will not listen does far more intellectual damage to itself than to the university it has stopped listening to. (Jacobson 2007)

The harm of the academic boycott begins at home with the destruction of the academic project and the idea of the university. It is also within the home institution that anti-Semitism strikes first. The boycott 'debate' launches the boycotters into a fight against the overwhelming majority of Jews who experience their campaign as an antisemitic attack. The boycotters portray themselves as standing in the tradition of the South African struggle against apartheid. But there are other boycott traditions too which endure with clarity in Jewish collective memory. This would not be the first time that Jews would be excluded from European universities: Jews were excluded from all universities until the 19th Century; Jews were excluded again from universities after Hitler came to power; the Arab boycott of Jewish businesses began in the same year as Hitler's final defeat. One of the most fatuous claims of the boycott campaign is that their exclusion would help Israelis to see that Israel should behave better; in truth their exclusion would be experienced by Israelis as anti-Semitism and it would push left-wing Israelis towards the political centre and the national consensus. True, many boycotters are Jews, but not many Jews are boycotters. No matter how often and how loudly Jewish boycotters speak 'as Jews,' no matter how hard they struggle to neutralize anti-Semitism as an issue in the 'debate,' no matter how desperately they insist that the Jewish community is split on the issue, they do not succeed; the Jewish community is not really split and anti-Semitism is an issue in the 'debate.' So the appearance of the campaign to exclude Israelis from our campuses brings with it a toxic atmosphere. People who oppose the boycott are attacked as pro-imperialist, pro-Zionist, pro-apartheid, uncaring of Palestinian suffering, supporters of the occupation and users of the charge of anti-Semitism as a dishonest smoke screen. And most of the people thus accused are Jews. With the campaign to exclude Israelis comes a campaign to libel Jewish academics and Jewish union members; Jewish students too

The boycott campaign did enormous damage to the academic unions in Britain. Unity is paramount for the union to fight for the pay and conditions of its members and for the education system more widely. The pro-boycott 'left' chose to divide the union between those who know how to recognize the smell of anti-Semitism and those who can't recognize it or who refuse to sniff the air.

The boycott campaign libels Israeli universities and so institutions which back the boycott put themselves at risk of a damaging libel suit. The boycott is an antisemitic policy which violates the antiracist constitutions of unions and universities and so puts them at risk of legal challenge.

Many UCU members resigned from the union over its support for the boycott. Some did so publicly while many others have simply stopped paying their dues, forgotten to renew their membership, or decided not to join in the first place. In these ways, Jews and antiracists (people who oppose anti-Semitism) were excluded from the UCU.

### (c) Damage to Palestine

Palestine is in crisis. The occupation is intensifying; the wall is being completed; the checkpoints are as numerous and humiliating as ever; the Israeli settlements are growing and multiplying; and life, particularly in Gaza under Hamas, isolated from the world, is increasingly grim. Why, given these circumstances in Palestine, is the international solidarity movement so small and weak? I believe that people who have sympathy with the plight of the Palestinians are put off Palestine solidarity by the smell of anti-Semitism that swirls around it.

Within the trade unions, the boycott 'debate' is not between those who support Israel and those who support Palestine but is almost entirely a debate amongst people who hope for a just peace, who oppose the occupation and who hope for freedom for Palestinians. The campaign arbitrarily splits them in half over the irrelevant and divisive question of how Israeli academics should be punished. A whole layer of people who think of themselves as friends of Palestine are treated by the boycott campaign as enemies of Palestinians. In this way, the boycott campaign splits and disables Palestine solidarity work in Britain. In this way, the boycott campaign damages Palestine.

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### (d) Inconsistency

A question which is often the first one to occur to somebody when they learn that there is a campaign to boycott Israel, is 'Why Israel?' There is genocide going on in Darfur and it has killed hundreds of thousands of people and caused the death of hundreds of thousands more of the millions who have been displaced. There is a dictatorship ruling Zimbabwe which fails to feed its population and which has organized hundreds of thousands of house demolitions in the last few years. China has been running a bloody and repressive occupation of Tibet for decades, has moved millions of its own settlers into Tibet and has deported hundreds of thousands of Tibetans to the Laogai camps, the Chinese version of the Gulag. Russia is running an occupation of Chechnya which has resulted in the deaths of countless thousands of Chechens, particularly during its re-conquest of Grozny, the capital city, in the mid-1990s. There are very many states in the world where there are ethnic or gendered exclusions from citizenship, or systems of two-class citizenship, or systems whereby many of the people who do the work are defined as non-citizens or guest-workers. There are very many states in the world which came into being following ethnic struggles over territory and the forced movement of populations. There are many states in the world which are still fighting over pieces of territory with their neighbours. There are many states in the world where there is no freedom of the press, freedom of speech, no functioning legal system. There are many places where trade unions and political parties are illegal and repressed. There are many places where there is no democracy. So why, in British trade unions and on British campuses, are there campaigns only to punish Israel? There are many answers to this question, but none of them is satisfactory. It is true that any individual has every right to be concerned about whatever particular cause happens to engage them, but a trade union should be concerned with human rights abuses in general, not with only with human rights abuses that are committed by Jews.

### (e) Universities as particular targets of the boycott campaign

There are two strands to the argument about why academics in particular should be boycotted. One is that the academic boycott is one part of a general boycott of Israel. The other is that Israeli academic institutions are themselves particularly guilty of facilitating, legitimating and organizing human rights abuses. The boycott campaign continues to recycle a number of libels and half-truths about Israeli academia. These are effective with an audience that knows little about Israel and less about Israeli universities. Both Haifa University and the Hebrew University have about 20 percent Arab students as well as significant numbers of Arab faculty

members. This is a rate of inclusion of minorities which would shame many elite British institutions. The truth is that the universities are amongst the most antiracist spaces in Israel; spaces where ideas for peace and against racism are forged, taught and practised. The Oslo peace process, destroyed by Israeli and Arab extremists, was forged by links between Israeli and Palestinian academics. Certainly there are institutional and other connections between Israeli universities and the armed forces and the armaments industries; this is standard throughout the world. In many states, universities are state controlled institutions. In Israel, as in most democratic states, they are formally, and to a large extent actually, independent institutions.

One precedent that the boycott campaign seems to set is that academics (and musicians and artists and sportspeople) should be held responsible, and should be punished by exclusion, for the human rights abuses committed by their state. This kind of collective responsibility is not the usual attitude taken by left and liberal critics of state human rights abuses.

A boycott of Israeli academics would harm the Palestine solidarity effort, it would harm the Israeli peace movement and it would harm the peace process. It would mis-educate young people who were concerned about the Middle East to believe that it was a simple problem of good against evil. It would harm the boycotting universities and unions and it would harm the boycotted universities. It would act as a catalyst for antisemitic ways of thinking and it would constitute in itself an anti-Semitic exclusion. The only good the boycott campaign does is to make some comfortable and self-righteous people, far away from the violence, feel that they are 'doing something' to help.

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### Notes

[1] See Hirsh 2008 for more on this easy disavowal of anti-Semitism.

[2] Pravda Tuesday, 13 January 1953, Page 1. Translation copyright © 2000 by P.R. Wolfe and BINIE staff, <http://www.cyberussr.com/rus/vrach-ubijca-e.html>.

[3] Rose was speaking in a debate at Goldsmiths College on 27 September 2006.