

Why the Left Should Oppose Academic Boycotts

A Response to the [AAUP Journal of Academic Freedom, Volume 4](#)

By Chad Alan Goldberg

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What the social-democratic left has always objected to is not the liberal aspiration to universal rights and freedoms, but rather the way that classical liberalism generally ignored the unequal economic and social conditions of access to those freedoms. The liberal's abstract universalism affirmed everyone's equal rights without giving everyone the real means of realizing these formally universal rights. The rich and the poor may have an equal formal right to be elected to political office, for instance, but the poor were effectively excluded from office when it did not pay a full-time salary. For this reason generations of social democrats have insisted that all citizens must be guaranteed access to the institutional resources they need to make effective use of their civil and political rights. The British sociologist T. H. Marshall referred to those guarantees as the social component of citizenship, and he argued that only when this social component began to be incorporated into citizenship did equal citizenship start to impose modifications on the substantive inequalities of the capitalist class system. Today, when neoliberalism is ascendant and the welfare state is in tatters, it is more important than ever to remember the social-democratic critique of formal equality and abstract universalism.

Like other freedoms, academic freedom cannot be practiced effectively without the means of realizing it. At one time, those means were largely in the hands of academics themselves. As the German sociologist Max Weber put it: "The old-time lecturer and university professor worked with the books and the technical resources which they procured or made for themselves." Like the artisan, the peasant smallholder, or the member of a liberal profession, the scholar was not separated from his means of production. But that time is long past. As Weber understood well, this "pre-capitalist" mode of scholarship had already disappeared a century ago, when he wrote those words. The modern academic, he pointed out, did not own the means to conduct scientific or humanistic research or to communicate his or her findings any more than the modern proletarian owns the means of production, the modern soldier owns the means of warfare, or the modern civil servant owns the means of administration. Like those other figures in a capitalistic and bureaucratized society, the individual academic depends on means which are not his or her own. Specifically, she relies on academic institutions and the resources they provide—access to books, journals, laboratories, equipment, materials, research and travel funds, etc.—to participate in the intellectual and communicative exchanges that are the lifeblood of her profession. Unless she is independently wealthy, she depends on an academic institution for her very livelihood.

What, then, is an academic boycott of Israel in relation to these facts? The boycott recently endorsed by the American Studies Association, its supporters emphasize, is aimed only at Israeli academic institutions and not at individual scholars. Consequently, Judith Butler explained in the pages of *The Nation* in December 2013, "any Israeli, Jewish or not, is free to come to a conference, to submit his or her work to a journal and to enter into any form of scholarly exchange. The only request that is being made is that no institutional funding from Israeli institutions be used for the purposes of those activities." Butler argues that such a request does not infringe upon the Israeli scholar's academic freedom because that scholar can pay from her "own personal funds" or ask others to pay for her. Personal funds presumably come from the salary paid to the Israeli scholar by her institution, but for Butler money apparently ceases to be institutional once it changes hands. One wonders why this same reasoning doesn't apply to conference or travel funds furnished by an

Israeli university. One also wonders how many ASA members are willing to raise their own dues or earmark a portion of their current dues to pay for the participation of Israeli colleagues in the activities of their organization. Furthermore, one wonders why Butler, who has raised concerns about new forms of effective censorship exercised by private donors, does not have similar concerns about the donors who might pay for Israeli colleagues. But the most serious problem with Butler's proposal is that it imposes special costs and burdens on Israeli scholars, creating substantive inequalities that undermine the formally equal and universal freedoms that she is eager to affirm for everyone in the abstract. While scholars of other nationalities may use the resources of their institutions, Israeli scholars must make do with their own private means or rely upon charity; they enjoy equal academic freedom in the same way that the rich and the poor are equally free to hold an unpaid office. For the generously paid academic aristocracy at elite institutions, using one's own personal funds may only be an "inconvenience" (Butler's word) rather than a hardship. However, not all academics have personal resources in such abundance, and those with fewer personal resources are more dependent on institutional funding.

Because "academic freedom can only be exercised when the material conditions for exercising those rights are secured," Butler has argued, the academic freedom of Palestinians is vitiated by the conditions of Israeli military occupation. She is indeed right, but the remedy for military occupation is a negotiated peace, not an effort to deprive Israelis of the material conditions for *their* academic freedom. Butler seems not to understand how her point militates against her own demand that Israeli scholars become *luftmenschen*. The distinction between an institutional and an individual boycott only makes sense in a world of abstract universalism, where Israeli scholars are entitled to academic freedom in a formal sense without equal access to the institutional means and resources they need to realize it in practice. The great irony of the campaign to boycott Israeli academics is that its proponents consider it a litmus test of left-wing politics when in fact they fail to apply consistently one of the left's most important insights.

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