

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

By Members of the USACBI Organizing Collective

Dear Ashley Dawson,

We write to you in regards to the articles and responses that appeared online in JAF on the topic of the Academic Boycott of Israel. We want to thank JAF for publishing essays that engage the public debate on Israel in the US academy. Volume 4 (2013) of JAF and the controversy that it has produced confirm the importance of these matters to a growing number of professors and students. In an academic environment subject to increasing external financial and political influence that seeks to restrict academic freedom, the JAF articles on the academic boycott of Israel exemplify how “struggles for academic freedom must work in concert with the opposition to state violence, ideological surveillance, and the systematic devastation of everyday life” (Judith Butler, "Israel/Palestine and the Paradoxes of Academic Freedom," *Radical Philosophy* 135 (Jan/Feb 2006): 17. <http://www.egs.edu/faculty/judith-butler/articles/israel-palestine-paradoxes-of-academic-freedom/>).

All parties to the debate on the Academic and Cultural Boycott of Israel (ACBI) believe that they are defending academic freedom, but they hold differing understandings of this guiding principle of our professional activities as scholars and educators. AAUP has done very important work promoting academic freedom in the US and abroad, but it has in the past endorsed a rather narrow view that positions academic boycotts as antithetical to its mission. In an ever more polarized academic environment, around a wide range of international issues, the appearance of the JAF special issue suggests that AAUP is open to a broader understanding of academic freedom that acknowledges the legitimacy of the academic boycott of Israel. This development certainly must be unsettling to ACBI opponents, who have moved aggressively to discredit authors of academic boycott articles and the editor of JAF.

It should go without saying that in the United States, to advocate the boycott of Israeli universities is a difficult position to hold. As noted in several of the JAF articles, to take a public stand critical of Israel often comes at professional and personal cost to US academics. There is significant pressure on junior faculty in particular to maintain silence. And even if there is a growing number of academics prepared to endorse the boycott of Israeli universities, there is also a powerful countervailing trend aimed at containing criticism of Israel and undermining the freedom to express political views on campus. This tendency is evident, for example, in the highly tendentious 2012 report, "A Crisis of Competence: The Corrupting Effect of Political Activism in the University of California." It is also more directly apparent in Jonathan Marks' scurrilous attack on the editor of JAF in *Commentary* ("George Orwell Call Your Office" 10/14/2013) and Stanley Fish's defense of the ivory-tower intellectual as an alternative to the politically engaged academic ("Academic Freedom Against Itself: Boycotting Israeli Universities" *NYT Online* 10/28/2013).

The appearance of several essays in JAF that argue in favor of the Academic and Cultural Boycott of Israel (ACBI) indicates that some officials within AAUP recognize the need for a more open dialogue on academic freedom and the politics of boycott despite the organization's stated opposition to the boycott of Israeli universities. Unfortunately, others among the AAUP leadership are not prepared to grant JAF editorial independence and are insisting that the journal revise the contents of Volume 4 to include more anti-boycott articles in the interest of ostensible balance (see Peter Schmidt, "AAUP Journal Under Fire . . ." *Chronicle of Higher Education* 10/22/2013). Apparently it is not enough that JAF has already published two rather repetitive responses by AAUP

officials, namely Ernst Benjamin (former General Secretary) and Cary Nelson (Past President).

In the interest of brevity, we will focus on Cary Nelson's response to the pro-boycott articles published in JAF Volume 4. Nelson not only reiterates familiar arguments that the boycott violates the academic freedom of Israel, he goes further exaggerating the goals of the academic boycott movement. For example, Nelson claims that some advocates of the Academic and Cultural Boycott are seeking "the abolition of the Israeli state" (2). This unsupported and false assertion is analogous to the more common and equally inflammatory propensity in US public discourse to equate criticism of Israel with anti-Semitism.

Even though Nelson acknowledges the wrongs of the Israeli occupation in the Palestinian territories, he views Israel as merely a flawed democracy, where academic freedom flourishes, in contrast with the neighboring Arab countries. He writes: "But we know quite enough to state unequivocally that there is more academic freedom in Israel than in other nations in the Middle East" (1). The implication here is that if advocates for the academic boycott of Israel were truly concerned with academic freedom in the region, and not driven by an incomprehensible hatred of Israel, they would focus their efforts on the Arab countries. These arguments, in their refusal to address Israel's abrogation of Palestinian academic freedom, are a form of misdirection that has less to do with defending academic freedom as a principle and more to do with defending Israel in the face of criticism by established academics, such as David Lloyd, Malini Johar Schueller, Bill Mullen, and Joan Scott.

Three additional key examples illustrate further how Nelson puts the notion of academic freedom to use primarily as a defense of Israel. First, he notes that Israel is not a police state or broadly repressive like Libya, North Korea, East Germany, South Africa, the Soviet Union and Syria. Then he writes: "The Lloyd/Schueller assertion that 'If there has been anywhere a systematic denial of academic freedom to a whole population, rather than to specific institutions, it is surely in Palestine under Israeli occupation' is historically inaccurate. Presumably 'Tibet is out of sight and out of mind for both them and Mullen' (3). Even if Israel is not generally viewed as a "broadly repressive" regime in the same way as Libya, North Korea, etc., Israel's infringement of Palestinian academic freedoms and other rights is perhaps more objectionable because Israel and its defenders assert that it is democratic, even though Israel systematically denies free movement, free communication and free circulation of ideas to Palestinians, thus undermining the right to education and academic freedom in the occupied West Bank and Gaza Strip. (One might add that the treatment of Palestinian Israelis whose educational rights and opportunities are not equal to Jewish Israelis further undermines the claim that Israel is substantially different from other repressive states.) A scholar of Nelson's stature and experience must understand that repressing the rights of one group (Palestinians under occupation and in Israel) and granting a surplus of rights to another group (Israeli Jews) makes for a broadly repressive regime not unlike apartheid-era South Africa.

Along the same lines, the second significant example is Nelson's reference to Chinese repression in Tibet--which Alan Dershowitz elaborates in *The Case Against Israel's Enemies* (87) and which Benjamin also invokes. Here Nelson unintentionally suggests an analogy between China and Israel. According to the implied analogy, China and Israel are equally repressive in the territories they occupy. The argument follows that the Academic Boycott of Israel movement should also call for a boycott of Chinese universities to be consistent with the principle of defending academic freedom under military occupation. Even if one views China and Israel as similarly occupier nations that curtail academic freedom in the territories occupied, of the two countries only Israel is a beneficiary of substantial US financial and military aid. Israel receives more US economic and military aid than any other country in the world and in this regard it is exceptional. In addition, while the US government has regularly criticized China's human rights abuses in Tibet and elsewhere, US foreign policy has consistently shielded Israel from criticism and diplomatic censure at the UN.

Israel, unlike China, is a vassal of the US. The particularity of the academic boycott movement is congruent with the special relationship between the US and Israel, which extends into US academic agreements with Israeli institutions of higher learning. If the US government applied greater pressure on Israel by withholding aid, imposing sanctions, or otherwise condemning Israel's violations of international law, and if US university presidents considered Israel a pariah state based on its methodical destruction of Palestinian society and its denial of academic freedom for Palestinians, ACBI would be unnecessary.

This last observation may appear to confirm Nelson's assertion that "A boycott of Israeli universities is more a tactical strategy than the moral and ethical priority" (4), which leads to the third and final example. The Academic and Cultural Boycott of Israel may well appear to be "a tactical strategy," but it is nevertheless grounded in a commitment to academic freedom. Two of the central preoccupations of the academic boycott movement are 1) creating awareness about the infringement of academic freedoms under Israeli occupation, and 2) bolstering academic freedom in the US, where, as noted above, it has historically been very difficult to speak critically about Israel. Nelson acknowledges the need to address these concerns when he points to his defense of the academic freedom of Neve Gordon who "was attacked both in Israel and the US for his boycott advocacy" (4). By Nelson's own admission, advocating the boycott of Israeli universities needs to be protected according to the principle of academic freedom in the US.

So why then does Nelson resort to personal attacks on the authors of the pro-ACBI essays in JAF? His response to academic boycott advocacy often has recourse to *ad hominem* arguments, linking the authors or their views with "fanaticism," "the abolition of Israel," and "opportunism" and labeling some of their claims "ignorant," "untrue" and "inaccurate." Nelson's rebuke of his US colleagues aims ultimately to position criticism of Israel as a form of dangerous extremism; he suggests that the only explanation for advocacy of the boycott of Israeli universities must be an irrational animus toward Israel.

Unpacking Nelson's response to the pro-boycott essays makes evident that his stultifying attack on the authors is a defense of Israel wrapped in the mantle of academic freedom. In doing so, Nelson instrumentalizes academic freedom on behalf of Israel, while claiming that he is protecting the principle from this very sort of tactical opportunism on the part of ACBI advocates. Nelson presents himself as the arbiter of academic freedom, who rejects the academic boycott argument, but still defends the right of ACBI advocates to express their views. Nevertheless, he appears to be unable to see how he often formulates his opposition to the JAF pro-boycott essays in terms that echo arguments made by apologists for Israel, like Alan Dershowitz, Daniel Pipes and David Horowitz, and at times coincide with conservative approaches to academic freedom in the US, such as those characteristic of the American Council of Trustees and Alumni (ACTA).

While AAUP need not univocally endorse the boycott, it is reasonable, and indeed in keeping with AAUP's mission, for JAF to provide a forum for pro-ACBI views without the contributors and editor being subject to the censure of AAUP officials. Nor should JAF be expected to surrender its editorial autonomy by granting equal place to the anti-academic boycott position, which has numerous channels of diffusion and is widely held among university administrators in the US. Despite Nelson's objections, JAF has served the interest of academic freedom by publishing views that challenge conventional thinking on the academic boycott of Israel.

Sincerely,

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