

Boycott on U.S. Campuses: From Moral Language to Political Practice

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The story of the boycott movement on American university campuses is one of transformation from a moral language to a political practice. The debate about whether boycott of Israel is justified on moral or instrumental grounds succumbs to a false dichotomy. It is obvious that an action's moral righteousness does not make it politically effective; neither does an action's political effectiveness make it morally right. The gap between what is right and what is "practical" is a source of tension and potential for activists. True political work bridges this gap without resorting to sloganeering or compromising principles.

In 2006, a small group of students revived the organization Students for Justice in Palestine at the University of California, Berkeley (UC). We had little activist experience. But from the previous generation of students — who were active at the height of the Second Intifada — we inherited the idea of boycott as a proper response to Israel's oppression of Palestinians. In 2002, the previous generation occupied a campus building to demand that the UC divest from Israel. Their initiative failed, their group was suspended, and a number of disciplinary proceedings were initiated against them.

Nevertheless, our new group initially adopted the 2002 group's language of boycott, engaging the public with little more than grandiose calls to action: We must boycott Israel. We must boycott the occupation. The UC Regents must divest. United States aid to Israel must end. Why? Israel is an apartheid state.

We followed in their footsteps although the slogan "Boycott Israel" lacked clarity. Considered in economic terms, does it mean boycott of all Israeli companies? All companies that conduct business with or in Israel? All companies in economic relationships with the Israeli government? All companies transacting business with Israeli companies? All companies anywhere around the world that involve Israelis? Or only those companies and economic relationships that are themselves complicit with the oppression of Palestinians or rely on this oppression? And what exactly is meant by

relying on oppression? If a company has some connection to Israel, does that mean it relies on oppression, because Israel's establishment and continued existence involves oppression?

Without conceptual clarity, the slogan was leading to absurd and useless conclusions. The lack of practical considerations meant that our work had a strong evangelical quality. We aimed to change the opinions and beliefs of individual people. In so doing, we mistook the problem of Palestine as one of personal ignorance without acknowledging the powerful structural forces responsible for it — both in Israel and in the United States.

Many people therefore regarded our work as futile; there was no way to challenge the entrenched forces against our aims. While we wanted to take practical action, we wished to avoid the pitfalls of pragmatism. Its language is intellectually lazy. An action's practicality is contingent upon many factors and pragmatism often functions to excuse inaction and rationalize the compromise of principles.

In order to act effectively, we must understand and address the factors that determine whether an action is practical or impractical. True political work begins with the assumption that any political system is contingent on numerous factors always subject to contestation. Rather than playing by the rules of the game, the boycott movement must aim to change the rules that obstruct the realization of justice.

We eventually brought these ideas into practice in 2010 by focusing our divestment efforts on the student government, which was more democratic than the UC Regents and within our reach. By this time, the crude "Boycott Israel" language of 2002 had been abandoned. Boycott was instead situated in a more coherent ethical framework borrowed from similar initiatives around the world and inspired by the Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions call of 2005.

The transition from yelling "Boycott Israel" to saying something close to: "The student government should divest from all companies profiting from human rights violations and war crimes by Israel" may appear simple, but it is actually complex. The former is a slogan while the latter is a multi-faceted argument.

The latter statement makes a number of obvious arguments about Israel: Israel perpetrates

human rights violations and war crimes; companies are in fact implicated in these violations; these companies profit from the violations; and the student government in turn profits from these violations.

Such arguments should be familiar to anyone concerned with the Palestinian issue. However, these statements also include a number of subtle arguments that are not specific to Israel. Rather, the context of the claim gives rise to them: investors have an ethical duty not to profit from human rights violations or war crimes; student governments and universities should exercise this duty as investors; it is appropriate to exercise this duty on a case-by-case basis with respect to a single issue or country, as information about violations becomes available.

These arguments address institutions. Most arguments advanced by solidarity activists are about Israel. However, effective political work takes place on the level of arguments that rationalize, or render irrational, certain acts and policies of institutions. Arguments about institutions are thereby necessary to advance the political work of boycotts.

Consider the possible arguments advanced by opponents of divestment from Israel: negotiation and dialogue, not boycott, will lead to peace; Israeli security must be the absolute priority; anti-Semitism must be considered before criticizing Israel; and support for Palestinians is support for terrorism.

Just as important, and much more effective at discouraging boycott, are the following arguments advanced about institutions: universities should not involve themselves in political issues; it is the government's job — not the university's — to deal with foreign policy; administrators should avoid divisive issues; an investor's highest duty is to acquire profit.

Without invoking a stance on Israel, opposition to boycott can easily utilize only the second set of institutional arguments. These institutional arguments function both to obfuscate economic, political, and military interests and also, at this particular historical moment, to support Israel's apartheid system. They also do not even require their proponents to explicitly declare support for Israel.

To transform boycott discourse from a moral language to a political practice, we must

understand the relationship between the two sets of arguments outlined above. We should focus on developing the latter set of institutional arguments. We often ignore institutional arguments because they require that we, in some sense, think and talk about something other than Israel/Palestine. While presenting a challenge, we can bridge the gap between what is right and what is “practical” by attending to this discourse. It is only when we are forced to contend with this language that we engage in effective political work.

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