
Exchange on the Academic Boycott

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By **Justin Podur**
and **Stuart Murray**
and **Stuart Murray**

On November 28, 2007, Ryerson University in Toronto held a debate on "Academic Boycott and Academic Freedom" in the context of Israel/Palestine. Justin Podur wrote an article on the debate (<http://www.zmag.org/znet/viewArticle/17261>) and one of the debaters, Stuart Murray, replied. An exchange ensued, and we thought it would be interesting to publish the exchange as well.

Murray's reply to Podur's article:

Dear Justin,

I enjoyed reading your article. I believe you are fair in your brief summary of my position, although I never used the word "sacred" in relation to academic freedom and freedom of intellectual inquiry. I would not wish to make a fetish of such freedom; it is a site of perpetual struggle, not an article of faith or doctrine. In my view, the purpose of such freedom is non-dogmatic and anti-fundamentalist: always to question and to open ourselves to difference, to minority views, to thinking otherwise.

I would like to take this occasion to reflect on the Forum itself and hopefully to clarify my position. First, I should note that it was never to my knowledge publicized as a debate. "Debate" conjures the worst of position politics, postures of certainty on both sides, and moral and epistemological absolutisms. Some would argue that this is precisely what the Forum turned into. But perhaps there is a more generous reading of the event. While the Forum was meant to be a dialogue on academic boycott and academic freedom in the context of a

proposal to boycott the Israeli academy, it also served as the occasion to express some of the injustices committed by the Israeli state toward Palestinians (interestingly, nobody argued the Israeli case). In the Q&A, audience members shared personal stories, too. This kind of dialogue is tremendously important for a number of reasons: it helps to inform the audience (some of my students among them) about what is happening in Israel-Palestine, it makes the events personal rather than abstract or "academic," and moreover, it allows people to be heard, because these voices are often silenced by the mainstream media.

In a strict debate format, these personal narratives might not qualify as "evidence." To complete the argument, we would need to demonstrate how these narratives -- as emotionally moving as they are -- lead us to the inevitable conclusion that an academic boycott of Israel is the best response. Claim: We ought to boycott the Israeli academy. Evidence: A list of unbearable horrors committed by the Israel Defence Forces toward the Palestinians. The logical link between the claim and the evidence was never clearly made. The only link that was made, in my view, is: given these atrocities, SOMETHING must be done. Certainly very few would deny this -- nobody wants the status quo, regardless of their politics. I assumed that this was our starting point for dialogue. Look, we might say, we share the same goals, let's discuss possible means for achieving them (in this case, an academic boycott). For Prof. Sears, the claim would be the same -- we ought to boycott the Israeli academy -- but his evidence was, I believe: because multiple Palestinian organizations have asked us to. The link, then, is a link of solidarity, which becomes another (contestable) claim in itself: we ought to express solidarity. This is trickier, in my view, because true solidarity should imply critique. In my understanding, Sears concludes that because the academic boycott is the proposition on the table, and because certain Palestinian groups have called on us for solidarity, we must accept an academic boycott of Israel as the just solution. This was all backed up with a virtual catalogue of horrors -- all of them surely true, all unbearable, from bulldozed olive groves to murdered schoolchildren -- but again the link is not made. Just because a proposition is on the table, we should not conclude that it is the best one to pursue. In fact, I believe it would ultimately damage the Palestinian cause. Lastly, as someone who studies rhetoric, I found myself at the difficult end of an appeal to the emotions (employed both by Prof. Sears and Prof. Vally), "which falls," as Orwell once wrote, "upon the facts like soft snow, blurring the outlines and covering up all the details." Insisting, as I would, on a logical link makes a speaker seem monstrous, as if he is rejecting the horrors themselves or the people who voice them.

I was troubled, then, by the ease with which an anti-boycott position was construed as "anti-Palestine," or worse, "pro-Zionist." I fear many were seduced by such reductive reasoning (in true Oprah or George Bush rhetorical style). The situation is much more complex and we owe it to each other to listen, and not to generalize from particular cases. If indeed some Israeli academics support their state's violence, it is wrong to conclude that all Israeli academics are "complicit" with these policies and practices. Nobody debated the definition of "complicity," or how it would be judged, but this is essential -- it is the thin thread that joins the claim to the evidence. But here it seems that many had already decided in advance, placing themselves in the position of judge, jury, and executioner in terms of all Israeli academics' purported

"complicity" with the Israeli government. Here, we are on a slippery slope to totalitarianism. Who will get to decide what a "complicit" speech act is? Who will get to decide what "complicit" silence is? This is as dangerous and as wrong-headed as suggesting that all Palestinians are "complicit" with Palestinian suicide bombers, that they are anti-Semites, potential terrorists, etc. Those Palestinians who voted for Hamas or who do not actively speak out against the activity of "suicide bombers" (a misnomer, I agree with Saba Mahmood on this) should by no means be considered guilty. We must be less hasty in our conclusions.

Lastly, you ask a question of me and so I'd like to respond, if I can. You're right. There is always a danger that anything we say will be taken up and sloganized, misrepresented, misunderstood, used in ways that contradict our original intentions, and so on. I too worry that "academic freedom" will be made into an empty slogan. I started my speech by quoting President Levy and asking a similar question: who speaks for whom? But then I asked a deeper question (a critical question) of my fellow professors and of the university's administration: if we ought to embody and demonstrate the values of academic freedom and freedom of intellectual inquiry, how well are we doing? My answer: not very well. Many students would claim that we have sold our soul (our academic and intellectual freedom) to corporations. This is perhaps inevitable given our wider corporate culture. I am trying to claw back from this, to open a space for critique. I see that as my duty. And I argued that we must serve the "public good," rather than corporate stockholders. I think my views are shared by many students who agree that academic freedom and freedom of intellectual inquiry should not be held hostage to corporate agendas; by the same token, I argued, the university itself should not be instrumentalized in order to set limits on, to curtail, or to police what will count as admissible academic discourse.

Your question is, then, a deeper one: How can we know when "academic freedom" (or "apartheid," etc.) are being used as empty slogans? It's not easy. We have to judge the speaker, whether or not s/he embodies certain values, whether or not s/he is taking a risk in speaking. When I spoke at the Forum, I spoke out as an untenured professor, both against the dominant sentiment in that room and, while I support the administration's official position, I also offered a bitter critique of my administration (something that is particularly taboo at Ryerson, which has branded itself as a "practical" university focused on "career preparation"). I took that risk because I believe what I say is true, and I hope that I have given my friends, colleagues, and other audience members something to consider as they go home and think about the justness of an academic boycott and the wider purpose of university life. I hope, then, that this risk demonstrates my commitment to academic freedom, my unwillingness to be "owned" by any one group, and so on -- and I hope that this speaks for itself, that I am not just using some slogan to satisfy my ego or for some personal reward (I am still waiting for my gift basket from the President's office!).

Why did I take time to write a long and unsolicited response to you? Well, simply, I respected what you had to say in your article and hope that in some small way I have added to the important thinking you have done on this difficult issue.

My best,

Stuart

Podur's first reply:

Hi Stuart.

Thank you for this reply. If you like, I would be happy to publish your reply and mine, and if you'd like the last word, yours again, on ZNet. It seems to me that the debate was very important, the fact that it happened as much as the content, and I want it to be widely known that it did and want to give it, and the arguments, as much audience as possible.

In my view, much of the logical link about the relationship between the atrocities and the academic boycott is made by analogy to South Africa. An apartheid regime, destabilizing the region and committing abuses and atrocities, but simultaneously presenting itself as a democracy and depending on outside diplomatic, military, and financial support. The powerful states that support the regime show no intention of changing policy, so it's on individuals to begin to try to cut the ties of support. Hence boycott tactics - in the case of South Africa these included business, sports, and academics.

I agree that a boycott is not the only tactical option, nor even the only tactical option for international solidarity. There was a time when many believed that the best tactic was for internationals to join Palestinians in nonviolent resistance and accompany them in their daily activities of olive harvesting or try to prevent Israeli bulldozers from destroying their homes. I participated in this in 2002, before several foreign activists were murdered, as thousands of Palestinians have been. The tactic is still used, but it would be hard to have mass participation in this, and since Israel controls entry and exit and sees no reason to allow supporters of Palestinians access to Palestinians or vice-versa (this is, of course, a very effective boycott) there are major limits on this tactic even before the chilling effect of a couple of killings is considered.

The pursuit of legal redress in Israeli courts or at the UN is another tactic, but Palestinians don't get justice in such courts and Israel ignores UN rulings. Palestinians have also pursued armed struggle, but given the gigantic imbalance of military force as well as economic and media power, this tactic has found limits too, and it is not something internationals could (ethically or practically) participate in, although Israel, like the US and many other countries, takes foreign volunteers to fight in its military, against the Palestinians.

This is, to my mind, how one ought to evaluate tactics, on whether, among the available options, they are likely to work - work, in this case, to end the injustices against the Palestinians and the danger and instability to the region, including Israelis, that the Israeli regime (with important US and Canadian support) is responsible for. And whether they are likely to work, in turn depends on how much pressure they can apply, which depends on how many people can get involved and at what level, how much the tactic itself can be empowering or

educational. It also depends on whether that pressure can be directed against people who have the power to change things.

The ethical question is, what are the costs of this action, who will pay them, and will winning by this tactic have too high a moral cost? These sorts of questions are what cause many to choose nonviolent action over violent action and political solutions over military ones. But I believe that the answers to these questions, for international supporters of peace and justice in the region, suggest the boycott, divestment, and sanctions (BDS) strategy. If we disagree, it might be here, because I believe that strategies like BDS have to be evaluated in light of available options and costs, with the do-nothing option evaluated for its own costs. In the case of the academic boycott, I think it could be pursued in ways that did not do undue harm to Israeli academics. In the very worst scenario they would not suffer nearly what Palestinian academics suffer. But on your concerns about punishing these academics, I refer you again to the essay I cited by Moshe Machover (<http://www.flwi.ugent.be/cie/Palestina/palestina329.htm>), who, after presenting the same sorts of concerns you present below, writes:

* * *

I believe that sanctions such as the following are justified:

- + Refusing to participate in academic conferences co-sponsored by the Israeli authorities or by Israeli universities.
- + Acting within international scientific organizations so as to oppose them holding conferences in Israel.
- + Acting against cooperation at the institutional level with Israeli universities.
- + Opposing the award of grants by the EU and other international agencies to Israeli universities; refusing to act in any way (for example, as referees) to facilitate such grants.
- + Refusing to collaborate with a person acting as representative or on behalf of an Israeli university.

On the other hand, acts such as the following, targeting an individual merely on the ground that s/he is Israeli, are unjustified:

- + Withholding scientific collaboration with an Israeli scientist who acts in an individual capacity.
- + Hampering the publication of academic work by an Israeli.
- + Refusing to act as a referee of a paper submitted to an academic journal by an Israeli.

+ Dismissing an Israeli from the editorial or advisory board of an academic journal to which s/he had been appointed in an individual capacity.

Let me add three remarks. First, if you have some evidence that an individual academic is guilty of a war crime, or even of propagating racist poison, then you may well wish to have nothing to do with that person. But this applies whether or not the guilty person is Israeli. No general academic boycott of Israel need be invoked.

* * *

I agree with what you say about academic freedom and your own attempt to protect that space. I guess I'd just reply that the term apartheid can be used with respect to Israel with as much sincerity and with evidence (Uri Davis's book is where the case is most directly made). What was implicit in my question was that "academic freedom" is no more or less an empty slogan than "apartheid" is, and the way to tell the difference is to look at cases, examine evidence, etc. If we're doing that, we're not sloganeering. If we're not, we are sloganeering. But we can agree to disagree on this.

In response to your refusal to be "claimed" or "owned" by anyone, I do respect that, as I respect and appreciate your putting yourself out there for the debate in the first place, and being a very important part of making it happen, and happen as it did. I also could tell the difference between your position and Caruana's, especially at the end, even though most of the audience treated you both together in Q/A.

Sincerely

Justin

Murray's second reply:

Hi Justin,

Thank you for your thoughtful email. This is exactly the kind of exchange that would have been beneficial, but that got buried and was unexpressed during the forum. I encourage you to add it to ZNet.

I believe we have similar ends, though we disagree on the means of achieving these ends. Again, this strikes me as already a much more productive starting point. Several of my colleagues at Ryerson are wondering how to stage such a dialogue at the university. How should we navigate the many emotional investments while remaining respectful of individual suffering? It is no easy matter. And you are right about the deep problems: the USA and Israel (to name but two) are in flagrant violation of UN resolutions, repeatedly. The international

community lacks the collective will to hold these states to international law (whatever this can mean in a neo-colonial age). Academics -- and others -- benefit from this situation, however indirectly (sometimes more, sometimes less). No doubt. And it is true, too, that other tactics have proven ineffectual, often tragically so, with loss of life on both sides. One can also justifiably ask: what is the value of a life, and does a life on one side count for more than a life on the other? This is a very sad reality of our biopolitical age, which Foucault sums up by the expression, "to make life and let die" -- essentially, suggesting that some group of persons must be "allowed" to die in order that we may live, and live well (we never "kill" them, actively -- it is almost as if they die passively, of their own accord, a sort of moral failure). Current geopolitics tells this story in the most gruesome terms: pharmaceutical testing on "disposable life" in sub-Saharan Africa, child labour in "developing" nations, the situation in Israel-Palestine, among others. And, given this, it is very tempting to see some justice in the ethic of the terrorist, as a means to combat power from a position of relative powerlessness. The situation should leave every thinking person with an overwhelming grief, anguish, frustration, sometimes anger, despair.

And so I do have tremendous sympathy for those who argue a tactics of last resort. That said, I sincerely doubt the effectiveness of an academic boycott. I read what you write and, while it is at times persuasive (and hopeful), I find that the implications of this particular strategy are chilling. You would probably argue that it is worth the risk. I respect that, but am not ready to agree. How, for instance, do you distinguish between "Refusing to collaborate with a person acting as representative or on behalf of an Israeli university," which you support, and "Withholding scientific collaboration with an Israeli scientist who acts in an individual capacity," which you condemn? Who will police that frontier between the institution and the individual? How shall we judge the political identity of a person or persons? If your litmus test is financial support, for instance, then all individuals employed by academic institutions will be guilty -- not for their actions, but because of their circumstances. An ontological guilt. Or perhaps there will be other "tests" which will determine an Israeli academic's "complicity" with certain Israeli government policies and actions? What will they be? Will certain Israeli academics be "guilty on account of their silence," much as some at the Forum presumed that Prof. Caruana and I were -- by people who have not the first inclination to investigate our politics, to read our publications, to ask us? And who gets to decide what will count as "evidence" for any such judgement, by what standards? The danger of "evidence" is that it appears to be neutral, but it never is. There is a politics of evidence. So I do worry. Claiming to be able to judge in this case sounds like a totalitarian program, one that is sinister in its paranoia, deceptively simple in its application, but ultimately reduplicating the evil that it ostensibly seeks to redress.

A Realpolitik position such as the one advocated by those who back the boycott can, here, quickly become totalitarian. I know this is not the intention, and so it is for this reason that I speak out. I hope that some will hear in my speech an act of solidarity, not of an uncritical variety, surely, but it is the duty of a true friend, I believe, to say things that the other might not necessarily want to hear. Allowing Palestinians to have a voice, then, cannot be purchased at the price of denying others their voice, or worse, of choosing to speak for them,

of judging what is in their hearts. Human history is full of tragedies where the ends have justified the means: the Israeli security wall, Auschwitz, Hiroshima, Depleted Uranium used in Israeli and American warheads ("genocide" in a true sense, because it affects the genes of the next generation). These have at times been argued from the same evaluation of tactics that you point to: whether, among the available options, they are likely to work. These are sometimes justified as guerrilla tactics. They are war crimes, if not crimes against humanity (if war is not this already). In light of this, it is one thing to argue that, given the magnitude of the crisis, they are justified; it is another to dress them up as ethical or as part of a free dialogue.

I don't know, Justin. I sometimes think there is cause for despair. And I wonder if we can think of another way forward.

My best,
Stuart

Podur's second reply:

Hi Stuart.

You have cautioned against the use of sloganeering more than once. Part of that caution is the desire not to cheapen experiences by comparing things that are not alike. To that end, I have to protest your use of the word "totalitarianism" in the context of an academic boycott, a tactic by the powerless used against the powerful. Crimes of power have different intent, use different means, and have different effects, than crimes by the powerless, much less acts of resistance by the powerless.

The use of the atomic bomb was a war crime, but it was not a guerrilla tactic. The fact that someone made a decision that tens of thousands of other peoples' lives were irrelevant compared to the desire to make a demonstration of American power does not make it comparable in any interesting or useful way to the decision by a person of conscience to decide not to cooperate with Israeli institutions (or American ones or Canadian ones. And perhaps it's worth re-stating my disagreement with Caruana here, because if there were a boycott of Canadian academics, including myself, by Europeans and others, until Canada changed its foreign policy toward Afghanistan and Haiti and transformed Canada's colonial relationship with indigenous peoples here, I would support it, even though I would suffer as a result.)

As for your question about who would police the boundaries of such a boycott, the answer is a part of why the boycott is such a good tactic in this case. It is a political action that is based on an individual's conscience. It is your judgment, your conscience, that would make that decision. Preferably in a community, preferably in a conversation with others. That is how movements grow, through these questions of how to take political action and who can, and when, and why. The contrast with totalitarianism is, to my mind, stark - and I have seen plenty of the mindset you are concerned about among activists (I don't want to call it

"totalitarianism", though, for the reasons I've already stated, so let's call it ideological rigidity).

You're a philosopher, you said - let's use these terms precisely. Guerrilla tactics are those used to try to even the odds between military forces that are imbalanced. Totalitarianism is when a state demands not only passive obedience, but active participation in its authoritarian actions. You mention the apartheid wall, the atomic bomb, the ongoing destruction of Africa, but you think that an academic boycott goes too far. But there is no proportionality between these atrocities and any nonviolent tactic, including boycotts of all kinds.

Believe me, I know what it is like to despair, but I drag myself out of it because it doesn't get us off the hook. Doing nothing, advocating doing nothing, in the face of these things, is just a tactical option like any other. Like all the others - from economic strikes, to armed struggle, to boycotts, to media action, to legal action - it has to be evaluated on ethical and practical grounds for its likely effects. I have no fear of making such evaluations just because American or Israeli militarists also make them. Militarists also use computers, give talks, write articles, study politics and military situations, think about how to get their message across - do a lot of things I do, in other words. But they want different things from me. They are much more willing to make others suffer or die for their ends than I am. Our evaluations would therefore come out differently. But I think everyone has to make that evaluation, and I don't think you can avoid it by invoking academic freedom. That is the challenge that questioners put to you that I think you should try to answer. You agree there are atrocities. You agree that something must be done to try to stop them. I assume you reject other tactical options like armed struggle or legal redress (the latter on practical grounds, the former because I doubt someone who has moral objections to boycott tactics would not have moral objections to guerrilla warfare). If you reject academic boycotts as well as all other available options on ethical grounds, you are advocating doing nothing. Is that, in your view, the most ethical of the options?

I suspect it isn't, I suspect you would reject the question or answer that you simply don't know what the right option is, only that the boycott is the wrong one. That won't be good enough to satisfy people who want change, though, and I'd agree with such people.

Best

Justin

Murray's final reply:

Hey Justin,

I would like to clarify that shutting down speech leads to totalitarianism, it is a tactic of

totalitarianism, and has totalitarian effects: I know you do not intend this, and so I speak out because I fear your position does lead down this road. I see it as an inconsistency in your position, just as you see mine as inconsistent (at least insofar as you assume I espouse a political quietism, but more below on this).

Again, I am not at all convinced that an academic boycott, as it is formulated, is simply a tactic of the powerless against the powerful. Certainly, this may be persuasive if we speak of Palestinian versus Israeli academics. But how do Israeli academics stack up in Israeli society or vis-à-vis Israeli military policies, as intellectual or moral agents presumably empowered to bring about political change within Israel itself? They are relatively powerless, I would think -- and like academics in Canada, increasingly irrelevant as intellectuals, employed more and more to meet the "human resource" needs of market economies. Moreover, I would like to know the relative power of Israeli academics vis-à-vis their British, Canadian, and American counterparts (who are we, here, to judge them?). So the tactic of academic boycott is not aimed unilaterally toward the bastions of power and oppression, but elsewhere -- perhaps even toward the one site where positive change could emerge through genuine discourse. This is what strikes me as senseless. And, again, what strikes me as frightening is the blind willingness to take all Israeli academics as "complicit" (or to assume that the ones who are not "complicit" nevertheless implicitly lend their support to a boycott). I just do not know how someone could argue this sincerely. I would maintain that an academic boycott is not the most effective strategy, for Palestinians or for the world academy. This energy and momentum (not to mention money) could be directed toward places where real change could occur. And for those who really believe that academics are so powerful (and not just the target of a symbolic boycott), an academic boycott would be counterproductive because it ends up splitting our community along ideological lines, encourages identity politics and debate-style postures of certainty, rather than mobilizing the critical intellectual force of the community, to educate, to effect change through the classroom, through publications, public discussions, and so on. Continuing to insist on academics, in this light, seems vengeful if not hateful, targeting a group whose "complicity" and personal involvement in government policy is difficult, at best, to substantiate. On the contrary, in my talk I cited Judith Butler's list of organizations within Israel, organizations that work tirelessly for a just peace (see her book, *Precarious Life*, p. 116). A number of these organizations are "academic," many of their members are academics, and so it seems counterproductive to marginalize these people through a boycott.

And while it may sound good, I don't accept the "individual conscience" argument. A boycott is, after all, a policy that is adopted or rejected by one GROUP against another GROUP. The call to boycott is experienced as morally binding. If it were a matter of personal conscience, it would not be called a boycott (see Martha Nussbaum, who offers six alternatives: <http://dissentmagazine.org/article/?article=811>). If the call for a boycott helps to raise consciousness of the situation, it does so in an ultimately unproductive way that forces individuals to take sides rather than to work together through honest and open dialogue -- to be part of an effort to educate and to help individuals make more conscientious choices. Boycotts by definition foreclose such dialogues, and it is the duty of academics, I believe, to foster dialogue -- not to work to silence the voices of others, however difficult they may be to

hear. I believe, and I hope, that the university can be a place for such a dialogue, which is why it ought not to adopt policies that will have the opposite effect.

Lastly, I would say that totalitarianism, as I have used it, is not simply when a state explicitly demands passive obedience in some respects and active participation in others. It is also about the creation and manipulation of implicit desires. At the Forum, I began my talk with a discussion of corporate attitudes and how the university is being colonized by corporate/economic interests. I argued that this runs counter to the public good. In part, these corporations teach us how to desire; they offer us a ready-made vocabulary -- an Orwellian Newspeak -- that slowly eviscerates the vocabulary of political and ethical critique, the vocabulary of dissent. I fear that our political desires end up manipulated in the same way, and I fear that the position politics of a boycott end up doing the same thing. Here I would offer a few lines by Foucault:

"the major enemy, the strategic adversary is fascism.... And not only historical fascism, the fascism of Hitler and Mussolini -- which was able to mobilize and use the desire of the masses so effectively -- but also the fascism in us all, in our heads and in our everyday behavior, the fascism that causes us to love power, to desire the very thing that dominates and exploits us."

I see the university as a place that must educate the public, to teach a critical perspective, so that we might become wise to the rhetoric of our own submission. This means, at times, that we must begin at the limits of our knowledge or certainty; it means that we must question our own desires. Does this preclude political action? Far from it. Perhaps it is even the condition for thoughtful and just political action, to think about what it would mean to politicize or instrumentalize the university -- a place that should encourage a proliferation of voices, rather than a place that ends up policing whose voices will be heard, whose will be silenced, and makes these judgements based on political -- or for that matter, corporate -- ends.

In closing, I must try to address those who asked questions of me at the Forum, even as I acknowledge that the address must fail. What is the appropriate response to someone who stands up and speaks from the experience of unrepresentable violence and loss, who says her family was ethnically cleansed? There are no words for this, no words that can satisfy. To say that I feel grief, I feel anguish, in the face of another human being who has suffered -- what can this do? Perhaps I can listen, perhaps I can tell and re-tell those stories, and in some small way make a gesture of recognition. And yet, I struggle here, because I have to reject the call to boycott. I do not think that accepting the boycott can be the only way to address or to acknowledge this person. And it makes me very sad to think that this person might experience my rejection of a boycott as a rejection of them, a repudiation of their personal experience, a refusal of their suffering. It is not. And so if I do not back up my words, mere words, with actions that are immediately legible, that immediately satisfy, am I, too, guilty of "complicity" with certain Israeli government policies and practices? I hope not. I am an academic who works with words and who teaches in the classroom. I am not an historian, I am not an expert on Israel-Palestine. I am just another voice. But I take seriously the responsibility to speak and to write and to teach. This means opening a space where ideas can be freely exchanged. Critique IS a political activity; it is one means -- one among many -- of

exposing, of understanding, and of resisting state violence. This is part of what it means to serve the public good -- a small, but I would argue, indispensable part. I believe we must work to ensure that universities -- in Canada, in Palestine, in Israel, and elsewhere -- are places of free speech and intellectual inquiry.

Best,
Stuart

Podur's final reply:

Hi Stuart.

Let me try to conclude with an honest recounting of what I believe to be our differences.

First, we disagree about the facts of what an academic boycott is and what its effects would be. To you, an academic boycott is shutting down speech, which leads to totalitarianism. To me, an academic boycott is just one aspect of a broader withdrawal of cooperation or participation with a system in order to exert pressure to change a policy. A withdrawal of cooperation is one of the only tactics that is available to society at large to try to change a regime or a policy. Shutting down speech is something the powerful can do, something Israel does, for example, by jailing people who speak, or censoring them, or assassinating them, or refusing them the opportunity to travel or exchange with their colleagues. A refusal to engage with institutions from such a state is very different from this.

A second disagreement is on the importance of the academy and academics. It seems increasingly clear to me that you are not opposed to boycotts on principle, but only on an academic boycott, because of the importance of the possibility of the academy (as opposed to the fact of the academy, which we agree is corporate, neoliberal, instrumental, and militarist to a very unfortunate degree) as a place of free speech and dissent. To me the academy is just one sector, not different from other sectors, in which non-cooperation could be used as a movement strategy to try to force a change.

A third disagreement is on these issues of proportion. Because while you have doubts about whether the situation is dire enough, I don't. That is because I don't see any conceivable effect of a boycott on any part of Israeli society being at all comparable to what Palestinians are facing. The South African case is telling here. The Montgomery bus boycott comes to mind as well. The various campaigns of non-cooperation that India's nationalist movement organized also come to mind. Whites in South Africa, whites in the US, and British colonialists suffered some as a result of these boycott campaigns, but at their very worst there was no proportion at all between their suffering and that of the colonized. I know you're not a historian, so I apologize for raising all these

cases, but I have felt that there was a level of abstraction in all this that detracted from the debate, when the sole example was, as it always seems to be in these debates, the Nazis.

Finally, we also disagree (profoundly) about totalitarianism. You accuse me of being on the road towards it. I accuse you of having no sense of proportion about it. If you are saying that everything from Nazi death camps to British university teachers' boycotts is totalitarianism or fascism, then you are cheapening the suffering and mass murder of millions of people. But I think we understand our disagreement here and there is no need to go back and forth more on this.

Let me conclude on a positive note. I want to state again that I respect your sincerity. I think you know that many of the same forces that want to corporatize, "neoliberalize", and shut down discussion at the university refer to themselves as "pro-Israel". I got the impression throughout this discussion that you will make sacrifices to try to defend academic freedom from all kinds of assaults, including from these organizations. We have some disagreements, but on that principle we agree, and I expect we will have plenty to support each other about in the future.

Best

Justin

From: Z Net - The Spirit Of Resistance Lives

URL: <http://www.zcommunications.org/exchange-on-the-academic-boycott-by-justin-podur>