

PLEASE JOIN AND SIGN

BOYCOTTING ISRAELI ACADEMIC INSTITUTIONS: NOT THE WAY TO END THE OCCUPATION

We, the undersigned anthropologists, oppose the recent call by some of our colleagues to boycott Israeli academic institutions. Today, there is a state of Israel but not yet a Palestinian state: this injustice should be rectified as soon as possible. The conflict between the two national movements continues to result in tragic suffering and loss of life. Just as we affirm this, we assert that anthropology is about communication, grasping multiple perspectives, and understanding diverse histories; it can contribute to unpacking standard slogans and negotiating compromises. Boycotts erode this ethos: anthropologists taking absolute positions will not help the Palestinian cause.

Boycott is a political act that forecloses listening to others. We vehemently oppose the continued Israeli occupation of the West Bank and the siege of Gaza; they are morally wrong and politically misguided. We also believe that Israel, as the occupier of Palestinian lands for decades now, has the greater responsibility to move toward a peaceful settlement and withdraw from these lands. And Palestinian leaders must be prepared to respond. But a boycott of anthropologists and other academics undermines the principles of academic freedom, and squelches the exchange of ideas. It is more likely to increase polarization instead of widening the base for dialogue.

American Anthropological Association boycotts in the past have never been against universities or academic institutions. Academics, including anthropologists, should not be collectively punished and held accountable at a personal cost for decisions taken (or avoided) by their governments, decisions many of them criticize or oppose. Such a boycott would have no positive effect upon the plight of the Palestinians and their call for justice. It would merely increase dissension within the anthropological community.

It is disingenuous to claim that a boycott can effectively distinguish between institutions and individuals, and refrain from punishing individual scholars. Almost all academics in Israel, including anthropologists, are employed in state institutions. Furthermore, the last institutions anthropologists should boycott are Israeli universities and colleges; these are sites where history, society, and politics are subject to critical analysis and where students and scholars encounter challenges to their assumptions, and engage in vibrant debates. Many Israeli academics, in their work within and beyond the university, have been leaders in advocating peace, non-violence and the end of the Occupation. In fact, they are seen as a threat by the political right which hopes to maintain control over Palestinians. A boycott of anthropologists and academic institutions plays into the hands of those supporting the current political stalemate.

The call by anthropologists to boycott Israeli universities is a refusal to engage in a productive dialogue. It cannot claim the moral high ground by attempting to pass as ‘concerned engagement.’ Focusing on Israel alone, and condemning colleagues without understanding the lives they lead and the specific labor they pursue, is counter to the spirit that anthropologists everywhere should strive to uphold. In Israel/Palestine as elsewhere, anthropologists can contribute by listening, learning, and leaving room for ambiguity. Our unique skills lie in examining and challenging the taken for granted while suggesting new perspectives and previously unimagined ways to subvert the violence of the status quo. We urge all anthropologists to consider the manifold ways in which anthropology and anthropologists might move forward in the search for justice and in striving for peace in Israel/Palestine. Boycotting Israeli academic institutions is not one of them.