



REDUX: An educator's perspective on the academic boycott of Israeli institutions #BDS

written by Lara Deeb

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Over the past months, colleagues in anthropology and other fields have laid out strong [arguments for why one should support the academic boycott](#) of Israeli institutions. Last spring, students in one of my undergraduate seminars provided me with another reason: supporting Palestinian rights through the academic boycott is our responsibility as scholars *and educators*. This was the first time I taught a class focused entirely on analyzing representations of and mostly by Palestinians, in ethnography, memoir, short fiction, graphic journalism, and documentary and feature film. During the seminar, I challenged students to think about tensions between individual and collective understandings of the past and future, as well as the theoretical frameworks anthropologists use to analyze topics ranging from NGOs to religion. In turn, students consistently asked how they could read these materials ethically. It quickly became apparent in discussions and office hours that this class (unusually) shared the perspective that Palestinian rights were being systematically violated and wanted to discuss what kinds of action they could take in response. At their insistence, this question became the focus of our final class session.

Several students began our last discussion of the semester by asserting that they had a responsibility to talk to other people – friends, roommates, parents, cousins, aunts and uncles, colleagues, and neighbors – about Palestinian rights, Israeli state oppressions and violence, and U.S. media misrepresentations. Others were quick to remind the class that positionality mattered in these conversations.



What you can say depends on who you are. More poignantly, what students felt pressured to say depended on who they were. A Palestinian student described how they hadn't told anyone in college that they were Palestinian until another student challenged their self-silencing. Someone asked, "Why didn't you tell anyone?" "I knew they'd think I was a horrible person who hates all Jews," the student replied, "I'm not that. I'm a good person." Jewish students in the class described how awful and absurd it felt to be called a "Jew-hater," the term that has recently gained currency alongside "anti-Semite" or "self-hating Jew" on our campus. For them, it was especially difficult to express their critical perspectives to family members. Other students also talked about family disagreements and even ruptures. One said, "I can *never* tell them [their family] what I think or they'll stop speaking with me." Students of all backgrounds worried about the potential effects of expressing support for Palestinian rights on their job prospects. "What if I want to apply for a state department job someday?" Or a policy job? Or any job? In essence, much of this conversation addressed their fears about the material and social consequences of speaking out and criticizing Israel. And predictably, their views ranged from strategizing about how to have "the conversation" selectively in an effort to protect themselves to blatantly calling out such hesitation as cowardly "compared to what Palestinians are going through every day."



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Then a student quietly admitted how difficult it was for them to generate the courage to even begin a conversation about Israel-Palestine, and how a feeling of shame washed over them at the thought of being called anti-Semitic, *despite* their knowledge that criticizing the actions of the Israeli state is *not* anti-Semitic. Others began to chime in, expressing similar feelings. Clearly, the effects of organized efforts to reframe definitions of anti-Semitism to include criticism of a state, and the ensuing false accusations, run deep. This is part of what scholar [Umayyah Cable](#) calls "compulsory Zionism" (paralleling Adrienne Rich's



discussion of compulsory heterosexuality). Students talked about living in a context where compulsory Zionism was continually reinforced, not only by external organizations (like the [David Project](#), which recently began organizing students on campus to support Israel), family members, or roommates, but also from a place within themselves.

Compulsory Zionism is pernicious because it is deeply ingrained, especially for those who were raised in the U.S., and because it is often invisible, taken-for-granted, and espoused by people we know and care about. A single friend or family member can silence criticism of Israel, and young people – like my students – learn that expressing such criticism or support for Palestinian rights is perceived as unacceptable or so controversial that it should be avoided. Students were aware that they had been socialized into dominant narratives about Israel-Palestine, and they articulated the challenges of unlearning those narratives and undoing this self-silencing. One of them explained that they consciously confronted this process of unlearning – of decolonizing their mind – each time they had such a conversation. Another later wrote, in an email to me, that the seminar “became a space to realize that one is not alone in fearing the societal, familial, and employment repercussions of solidarity; though undoing colonial narratives and challenging a hegemonic Zionism is daunting, having a space to discuss it alongside anthropological discussions of Palestinian identifications was ground-breaking.”

Confronting compulsory Zionism emerged as a shared experience among these students – whether it manifested through expressing political views that contradicted those of one’s relatives, sharing knowledge with one’s friends and roommates, participating in Palestine-related activism despite opposition from classmates and administrators, or asserting one’s Palestinian identity on a U.S. college campus.

And despite feeling (differently) vulnerable, the class collectively insisted on discussing possibilities for action. For most students, “just” talking to people was



important, but not enough. Quite a few were activists with Students for Justice in Palestine and/or Jewish Voice for Peace. Others suggested ideas for action beyond campus, ranging from joining the International Solidarity Movement to blogging or becoming a journalist. A few sought out experiences like the [Lajee Center's](#) summer work camp. But by far, the idea that provided the most concrete and feasible channel for their desires to take action was the movement to boycott, divest from, and sanction Israel (BDS).



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The last part of this discussion thus turned to the various ways we could each participate in the [BDS movement](#). Students readily highlighted how, as consumers, we could all participate in economic boycotts of companies that profit from Israeli violations of Palestinian rights. They added that those who were U.S. citizens could pressure for sanctions. And they argued that *as students*, they could organize to pressure their colleges to divest from companies that aid and abet the Israeli state's actions. Students also brought up the cultural boycott campaign and its successes (singer Lauryn Hill had just announced her refusal to perform in Israel). When an economics major questioned the efficacy of cultural or academic boycotts, an anthropology major was quick to point out that symbols are powerful. And then a student wondered aloud how many faculty members on our campus supported the academic boycott.

The [academic boycott of Israeli institutions](#) is a critical piece of the BDS movement, and an area where scholars can contribute in specific and relevant ways to the struggle for Palestinian rights. Figuring out how to best contribute to this struggle requires taking stock of one's own positionality and accompanying privileges and constraints. The academic boycott is both a well-thought out way to stand in solidarity with Palestinians and call out Israeli actions and U.S. complicity with them, and also a way to participate that makes specific sense for us as scholars. As educators, when we participate in the boycott, we provide a



responsible model of solidarity and political action for our students, a model for how - as academics - we can push back at compulsory Zionism in order to publicly take a stand critical of Israeli human rights abuses. As my students noted, as consumers, we can participate in economic boycotts, and as U.S. citizens, we can pressure for sanctions. In addition, as an individual scholar, I can apply the principles of academic boycott of institutions in my professional practice, and as a member of the American Anthropological Association, I can urge my professional association to join the academic boycott and cease all relations with Israeli academic institutions. I have long supported BDS and the academic boycott for the reasons that others have detailed quite eloquently. My students in that class gave me yet another one.