



Academic
Engagement
NETWORK

Revisiting the Boycott Campaign at the American Anthropological Association:

**A Divisive and Destructive Effort to Delegitimize
Israel and Undermine the University Mission**

Cynthia Saltzman

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ABOUT THE ACADEMIC ENGAGEMENT NETWORK (AEN)

AEN mobilizes networks of university faculty and administrators to counter antisemitism, oppose the denigration of Jewish and Zionist identities, promote academic freedom, and advance education about Israel. We envision a world where American higher education welcomes, respects, and supports the expression of Jewish identity and robust discourse about Israel.

ABOUT AEN'S PAMPHLET SERIES

The Academic Engagement Network (AEN) pamphlet series is an occasional series that addresses the primary concerns of the organization: championing academic freedom on American college and university campuses, opposing the BDS movement, encouraging a robust and sophisticated discussion of topics related to Israel and the Middle East, and combating antisemitism. Authors include AEN members and other noted scholars and thinkers who contribute to the discourse on these subjects. Certain pamphlets may also be accompanied by discussions with the author in the form of recordings or podcasts. For more information, please visit academicengagement.org.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Cynthia Saltzman is a cultural anthropologist and lecturer at Rutgers University-Camden. She has also taught at Barnard College and the University of Pennsylvania. She holds a B.A. from Bennington College and a Ph.D. in anthropology from Columbia University where she received fellowships from NIMH and the NSF for her doctoral dissertation work. She did her post-doctoral work at Yale University continuing to study women and white-collar unions at the University and then, as a Fellow in Yale's Program in Judaic Studies, researching women activists transforming Judaism. She has been a research director and consultant at a variety of institutions and professional organizations including an interim Associate Director in charge of public programs at the Herbert D. Katz's Center for Advanced Judaic Studies at the University of Pennsylvania and has worked for Demographic Perspectives as a consultant and institutional researcher for Bryn Mawr College and Harvard University. She has been active in the American Anthropological Association (AAA) trying to combat their academic boycott against Israel and was a Co-chair of the past Committee for the Anthropology of Jews and Judaism affiliated with the AAA. She has written on women and work and Jewish identity and folklore and most recently has been writing on antisemitism and anti-Zionism in unions and scholarly groups since the Hamas attack on Israel on October 7, 2023.

This essay focuses on the American Anthropological Association's academic boycott against Israel that reflects part of a growing trend in the United States to isolate Israel in the international community of scholars.¹ The boycott also reflects what Rabbi Jason Rubenstein, the Executive Director of Harvard Hillel, calls "a tectonic-shift in American Jewish life" where it has become "a norm - and not just 'normal' - to discriminate against Zionists and Israelis in many circles of elite, progressive culture." Moral virtue, he says, has become equated with anti-Zionism, and "a place is rendered pure by the exclusion of Zionists."²

Since October 7, 2023, when Hamas viciously attacked Israel and the war between Israel and Hamas ensued, the press and the Jewish community have been providing news coverage of disruptive student protests and encampments on college campuses that call on university administrations to divest from Israel. There has been less coverage, though, of the acrimonious debates in anthropology and other academic departments, scholarly associations, and faculty unions that have been years in the making before October 7 about whether to wage academic boycotts and punish Israeli universities. These debates go back to the Palestinian Campaign of the Academic and Cultural Boycott of Israel (PACBI) begun in 2004 to promote boycotts of Israel as part of its Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions (BDS) campaign which has been "an international effort to isolate the state of Israel economically and diplomatically with the ultimate goal of undermining the country's political and historical legitimacy." Thus, while many Jewish students and faculty were taken by surprise after October 7 by the cataclysmic rifts on campus and the angry anti-Zionist and antisemitic rhetoric of their progressive colleagues and peers, the early groundwork for polarizing debates about Israel were promulgated by ongoing organized international efforts.

BDS campaigns have had a measure of success promoting academic boycotts of Israel internationally and at home. In the United States, during 2013 alone, the Association for Asian American Studies (AAAS), followed by the American Studies Association (ASA), and then the Council of the Native American and Indigenous Studies Association voted in favor of boycotting Israeli universities and academic institutions. In 2014, the Critical Ethnic Studies Association endorsed a boycott of Israel including all Israeli universities, and in the same year, the African Literature Association passed a resolution in favor of an academic boycott against Israel. In 2015, the National Women's Studies Association (NWSA) endorsed the BDS movement against Israel.³

In 2016, the American Anthropological Association (AAA) narrowly defeated a boycott resolution by just 39 votes, less than 1% of ballots cast.⁴ Then in 2023, the AAA became the largest and oldest academic association in the United States to support the boycott. Only 37% of eligible members participated in the recent vote, with 2,016 members supporting the boycott, or about one quarter of the membership, and 835 voting against it.

The Executive Board of the AAA approved a set of actions barring Israeli academic institutions from:

- **being listed** in AAA's published materials, including AAA's AnthroGuide to Departments
- **advertising** in AAA publications, websites, and other communications channels, including the AAA Career Center

- **using** AAA conference facilities for job interviews
- **participating** in the AAA Graduate School Fair
- **participating** in the AAA Departmental Services Program
- **participating** in joint conferences or events with AAA and its sections
- **prohibiting** republishing and reprinting articles from AAA publications in journals and publications owned by Israeli institutions.”⁵

The boycott’s supporters argue that it is targeted against Israeli universities and not individuals. And the AAA did take some measures to protect Israeli individuals so that, for example, the boycott does not prevent “individuals affiliated with Israeli academic institutions from registering for and attending AAA conferences.”⁶ But of course, people are the lifeblood of universities and the two are inextricably intertwined. It is impossible to separate academics from their institutions, and our Israeli colleagues report that the AAA’s decision to implement a boycott against Israel’s academic institutions is having direct negative effects on its doctoral students and junior faculty. Moreover, one can only imagine how it will feel for an Israeli to wear a University of Tel Aviv name tag at an anthropology meeting when that university has been condemned and has pariah status.

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Several of my anthropology colleagues have been meeting as a group called “Anthropologists for Academic Freedom.” My participation in this group grew out of my association with the Academic Engagement Network (AEN), whose leadership team connected me with other anthropologists who opposed the boycott. We first tried unsuccessfully to lobby against the vote for a boycott, and I believe that I became the anthropologist who posted the most against the boycott on the AAA all-member online discussion forum. We are now trying to mitigate its effect.

Among our activities, we circulated a petition to get 250 signatures to prompt a vote of the full membership on a AAA resolution that would amend the organizational by-laws to prohibit any endorsement of an academic boycott directed at any country. But several anthropologists who had signed our petition did not renew their AAA membership, and others were contemplating resigning as a protest against the boycott. This would have made it very difficult to reach the necessary 250 signatures for a vote of the full membership on a new by-law. Instead, we are now hoping to work with the AAA leadership to find another way to prohibit academic boycotts, which would presumably cancel the organization’s boycott against Israel.

But our difficulties as members of the AAA and of the anthropological profession are more profound. An article appeared in the *American Ethnologist* in the February 2024 issue

written by proponents of the boycott reads, “Let us not allow this boycott resolution to end with the association’s vote. We hope that this decision empowers anthropologists to pursue conversations within their institutions about how scholars can support Palestinian rights through BDS as part of a broader set of linked anti-colonial, anti-racist actions. Activist connections have been reinvigorated—from Ferguson to Gaza and vice versa.”⁷

Anthropologists for Academic Freedom are against **all** academic boycotts, but we believe that “singling out Israel as the sole target is both hypocritical and antisemitic.”⁸ There are many regimes around the world that are corrupt and support murderous policies including China, Russia, and Iran, to name a few, and they are not the focus of an anthropological boycott, nor are we advocating that they should they be.

But the fact that the boycott overlooks countries with far worse records on human rights violations, and by sanctioning hate against the only existing Jewish-majority country and no others, the boycott is by extension, antisemitic according to the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA) definition.⁹ The boycott is also unfair because it ignores the complexities of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, including the centuries of struggle and mutual violence between competing nationalisms, identities, religions, and histories. It demands that anthropologists vilify one side to a tragic conflict in which both have missed too many opportunities for compromise and to live together in peace and justice.

Using mind-boggling logic, pro-boycott anthropologists have decided that it makes good sense to resolve what they perceive as the marginalization or “boycott” of Palestinian academics with another boycott aimed at Israel. This sets a dangerous precedent. Tying the AAA’s goals to the Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions (BDS) campaign also scapegoats a people and a nation.

We also believe that a boycott is a form of discrimination against our colleagues on the basis of national origin. It constitutes a barrier to scholarly exchange, academic freedom, and free inquiry. Ultimately, a boycott divides the AAA into camps, those for a boycott and those against, such that the organization can no longer purport to represent everyone’s common interests. For Jews in the AAA who are Zionist or who identify with Israel in any way, along with the majority of American Jews, the AAA has become an unwelcoming place.

Moreover, anthropologists’ boycott of Israel demonstrates how fragile academic freedom is and how easily our free speech and right to academic exchange can be endangered. Under the boycott, it might be possible for American professors to tell their students that they cannot write letters of recommendation for them to study in Israel because they are acting in compliance with an academic boycott. This violates accepted guidelines of professional ethics in coercing students who are exercising their own academic freedom. Faculty who refuse, under the pretext of a boycott, to write letters of recommendation on behalf of worthy students prejudice their students’ rights and legitimate interests and have justifiably

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faced disciplinary action by their own universities. The academic boycott against Israel will no doubt have the further consequence of marginalizing Jewish students on campuses and others who believe that Israel has a right to its sovereignty like every other nation in the world.

We remain opposed to a boycott even in light of the controversies arising out of Israel's response to Hamas' vicious attack on October 7. If anything, continued intellectual exchange with our Israeli colleagues is even more important now.

Vilification of Israel threatens academic freedom, in principle and in practice. As I wrote with a colleague in a previous essay, "The academic boycott against Israel compromises the AAA's role as a forum for robust continuing debate and scholarly investigation. The respected Kalven Report of the University of Chicago advocates that universities avoid speaking with one voice on controversial issues because this inhibits free inquiry and dissent."¹⁰ Many of us believe that the AAA, as a community of scholars, should abide by similar principles and remain a space for ongoing debate. Rather than "foster polyvocality surrounding a complex issue, the boycott of Israel seeks to silence social critique by implementing a single official position."¹¹

Further, to justify the boycott, the AAA accuses Israel of practicing apartheid 'from the Jordan River to the Mediterranean Sea,' including in the internationally recognized state of Israel, thus rejecting the nation's right to exist within any borders. That is, "the boycott fails to reflect the humility required before wading into a conflict with a complicated history and a controversial present. That the AAA would pursue such an intellectually and ethically shallow course is especially sad given anthropology's historic commitment to contextual understanding, deep description, and broadmindedness. To cut off ongoing informed conversation and genuine dialogue is against anthropology's mandate."¹² Pronouncing stances on controversial issues also has a coercive effect that forces everyone in the academic unit to adhere to the same perspective. Individuals have academic freedom that is protected, but as Cary Nelson, former President of the American Association of University Professors has pointed out, when academic departments take a stance on issues over which faculty and students are deeply divided, they create a hostile environment.¹³

When academic departments, programs, scholarly disciplines, and collectivities of faculty in labor unions become politicized and issue political statements on contested topics they can distort modes of reasoning, sacrifice scholarly rigor, and relinquish democratic decisions. The AAA debate on the boycott exposed the risks of politicization and of speaking in the name of a scholarly discipline—but outside the bounds of genuine scholarly expertise. This problem appeared in the microcosm by the example of an individual, distinguished scholar, Dr. Alisse Waterston who is a past president of the American Anthropological Association. Under her leadership, there was an earlier vote in 2016 for the membership to endorse an academic boycott of Israel. After its defeat, the AAA Board decided nonetheless to issue a condemnation of Israel anyway, despite the vote, because in President Waterston's words, "we had come too far." This action was profoundly anti-democratic because the vote against the boycott should have been the last word on the subject. I, for one, did not renew my membership at that time in protest.

When Waterston decided to endorse the boycott of Israel in 2022, she wrote in an announcement in *Mondoweiss* that she was giving it her support because: “As a Jew, I have looked to the moral teachings from my mother’s prayer book to help guide me. Perhaps none is more important or relevant than the imperative to pursue ‘justice, justice,’ a word written twice to teach us that we must practice justice at all times, whether it be for our profit or for our loss, and towards all men [sic], Jew and non-Jew alike.”¹⁴

As any serious reader of the Bible might point out, however, what she omitted is just as important. The passage “*Tzedek, Tzedek Tirdof*” comes from the Hebrew Bible in Deuteronomy 16:20:1. The specific text reads more fully: “Justice, justice shall you pursue, that you may thrive and occupy the land that Adonai your God is giving you.” In other words, God gave the Hebrews the land so that they might flourish. The relevance of this to contemporary politics is a complex question; I do not believe that the Bible need be read as if it were a contemporary political manifesto. But the potential resonance of that passage should not simply be elided by anyone claiming to rely on that very passage as a source of inspiration.¹⁵ More importantly, this example dramatically illustrates the problematics of authority and expertise and the need to interrogate all claimed connections between scholarly inquiry and political action.

Pro-boycott proponents often made other false and empirically invalid claims to score political points. For instance, they called BDS a “feminist enterprise” and stated that anthropologists’ purpose is to answer the call of Palestinian feminists. But their position was based on shallow feminism and exclusionary politics, not sound scholarship.

The claim that BDS is a feminist enterprise traces back to 2015 when the National Women’s Studies Association endorsed BDS. Over 120 Women’s and Gender Studies Departments signed the statement.¹⁶ Women’s and gender studies programs did not criticize Arab and Islamic states that ban and punish LGBTIQ+ individuals. Nor did they denounce the homophobic acts of Palestinian leadership, including both Hamas and Fatah. But they criticized Israel’s more liberal policies and tolerance for sexual expression as an imperialist agenda and “pinkwashing.” In light of this position, it is not difficult to understand why feminists after Oct. 11 were slow to condemn Hamas’s rape and murder of Israeli women.¹⁷

A boycott of Israeli institutions explicitly ties the AAA to the BDS movement. In doing so, the AAA itself may be subject to sanctions in 35 U.S. states that have laws, executive orders, or resolutions against the BDS movement, putting into question the location of future annual conferences as well as the participation of anthropology departments at public universities in official AAA activities. Doubtless, too, the AAA will lose many members and donors (and is already) over an issue that only one quarter of its members actively supported.

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The academic boycott of Israel is already producing specific and abhorrent practical consequences. Here in the U.S., many faculty members and students who identify with Israel and believe that it has a right to exist, no longer feel welcome in the AAA; it is no longer a safe place for Jews whose identity is tied to Israel. Moreover, negating Israel and its supporters emboldens antisemitic expressions and actions as we have seen in evidence since October 7. As I and my co-author noted, “the broader project of delegitimizing Israel is threatening the rights of Jews wherever they live to embrace their identity and live without fear.”¹⁸

The effect of academic boycotts in Israel is already counterproductive. As the American Association of University Professors argued in the past before it radically changed its policy, “The target of any boycott should be the specific policies of governments, not the students and faculty who oppose those same policies through public demonstrations, as had been happening throughout Israel.”¹⁹ Israeli academia faces an unprecedented global boycott to which the AAA now contributes. Canceled invitations to conferences, a hiring freeze on Israeli academics, the rejection of scientific articles on political grounds, and the disruption of lectures abroad – Israeli scholars from various disciplines have described a painful picture of how an uptick in shunning and ostracism has impacted them since the war broke out in Gaza.²⁰ Ironically, the AAA boycott takes aim at Israeli anthropologists many of whom are outspoken in their support of Palestinian rights and are critical of the conservative shift in Israeli politics. The AAA’s attack against universities therefore simply aids and abets the current ring-wing Israeli government in its attempt to suppress academic freedom, democracy, and dissent. Of course, boycotts also harm the nearly 20% of students in Israeli higher education institutions who are themselves Palestinian.²¹

As anthropologist David Rosen has written, “Suppressing moderate voices is central to the BDS’s anti-normalization campaign, which is designed to shut down debate and communication surrounding the Israel-Palestinian conflict and drive out the voices of dialogue and moderation. But no one should be surprised. All radical movements demand simple binary oppositions: a world made up of oppressors and oppressed, good guys and bad guys. BDS is no different.”²²

Sadly, the American Association of University Professors (AAUP), “a half labor-union, half professional-organization” which opposed academic boycotts since 2006 on the grounds they threaten academic freedom and free exchange, recently under a newly elected president (Todd Wolfson, a socio-cultural anthropologist and a Rutgers Associate Professor of Journalism and Media Studies), reversed its long-standing policy in August of 2024 and withdrew its categorical opposition to academic boycotts as a universal principle. Todd Wolfson, it should be noted, is also the head of the Board of the faculty union of the Rutgers AAUP-AFT chapter which has issued a statement in support of BDS goals. What this means is that individual university faculty unions represented by the AAUP-AFT will now be in alignment with the national AAUP-AFT’s policy. The influential organization has opened the floodgates for possibly endless boycotts against Israel and the decision is not encouraging for civil discourse on campus, nor for the inclusion of Jewish faculty members who support their union’s stances on labor issues, but who oppose boycott resolutions against Israel. I should state for the sake of transparency, that in protest against the Rutgers union’s pro-BDS

position, I quit the Board of the Lecturers' on my campus and am no longer a rank-and-file paying dues member of the union. As Cary Nelson, a former president of the AAUP, pointed out, "We must no longer use AAUP policy as the gold standard for academic freedom."

Historical antisemitism, when it was not genocidal, was often about exclusion or marginalization – from occupations, social milieus, neighborhoods, regions, countries. Its modern successors eerily echo that same impulse, which needs to be both named and resisted.

I wrote above about "the problematics of authority and expertise." There is a dangerous hubris reflected in the American Anthropological Association acting as though it were an international criminal court, passing judgment, sentencing Israel, and enacting punishment. Certainly, a boycott undermines the core mission of academia to foster the free exchange of ideas; it also widens political gulfs. As I and a colleague noted in an earlier essay, "Peace, mutual respect for all human rights, and an end to suffering will not come about by hardening people's hearts with academic boycotts. These laudable goals can be achieved only through dialogue—not by stifling it. The AAA boycott against Israeli universities and academics is nothing more than antisemitism hiding behind the virtue-signaling sophistry of a false morality."²³

Ultimately, boycotts erode the academic freedom of Israeli anthropologists and other scholars -- both Jewish and Palestinian -- by limiting the work they might conceivably do in the wider community towards conflict resolution, social justice work, and a lasting peace. If an academic boycott were merely virtue signaling, that would be bad enough. But if it turns out to frustrate the good work that anthropologists and other academics can do, that will be tragic and irresponsible.

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Endnotes

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