

Boycotting Israel

Academia, activism and the futures of American Studies

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On 4 December of last year, the annual conference of the American Studies Association resolved that ‘whereas the United States plays a significant role in enabling the Israeli occupation of Palestine ... whereas there is no effective or substantive academic freedom for Palestinian students and scholars under conditions of Israeli occupation, and Israeli institutions of higher learning are party to Israeli state policies that violate human rights’, its members would support both a boycott of Israeli academic institutions and ‘the protected rights of students and scholars everywhere to engage in research and public speaking about Israel-Palestine.’ Immediately, the American Studies Association (ASA) – a relatively obscure North American academic association – shot to prominence as, in the description of the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, ‘a pariah of the United States higher education establishment’. Despite its insistence that the resolution applies to Israeli institutions rather than individual scholars and students, over 100 US colleges and universities, the New York State Senate and 134 members of the US Congress have now condemned it for anti-Semitism and attempting to stifle academic freedom. The box opposite contains a timeline of the prelude to this resolution and subsequent events.

The American Studies Association is small by US standards, numbering about 5,000 mostly American members. Until now it has had little or no profile in the UK, where the study of US culture and politics has historically been spurred by ‘the special relationship’ abjectly claimed by British politicians of all parties, and by the direct sponsorship of the US government and the Fulbright and Rockefeller foundations in the continuation of Cold War cultural diplomacy. Student recruitment to UK American Studies programmes and departments has fluctuated with the fortunes of that relationship, and some commentators ascribe the closure of a few of these since 2000 to the unpopularity of George W. Bush and the second Iraq War. But there are other explanations for this apparent decline in what is often now called United States Studies. The increasing inter-, trans- or postnational understanding of the term ‘American’ means that the purview of the University of London’s Institute of American Studies, for one example, is now hemispheric, and will continue to be so as the economic and political influence of Latin America increases. At the same time UK English departments and the numerous media studies departments across the country have incorporated US literature, film and television in their curricula as the effective Californication of British culture is intensified by the Internet’s increasing dominance of all electronic media. The recent closure of the American Studies department in King’s College London may reflect this phenomenon rather than any waning

1993	Negotiations begin in Oslo to withdraw Israeli forces and citizens from the Palestinian territories occupied since the 1967 war.
1994	Gush Shalom, the Israeli peace group, calls on Israelis to boycott goods produced by settlers in the occupied territories.
2000	The Second Intifada (uprising) begins when Ariel Sharon's visit to the Temple Mount provokes Palestinian demonstrations, dispersed by live fire from the Israeli army. Five years of violence ensue, taking 3,000 Palestinian and 2,000 Israeli lives.
2004	The International Court of Justice issues an advisory opinion that the separation wall built by Israel on Palestinian territory is illegal.
2005	171 Palestinian NGOs call for 'Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions [BDS] against Israel until it complies with international law and universal principles of human rights' by ending Israel's occupation of all Arab lands and dismantling the separation wall; full equality for Arab citizens of Israel; Israeli promotion of the rights of Palestinian refugees to return to their homes and properties as stipulated in UN Resolution 194.
2005-6	Boycott campaigns are launched in Norway, Canada and South Africa.
2006	The Church of England synod votes for disinvestment from Israel.
2007	After averting a boycott resolution at its annual conference, the executive council of the UK University and College Union calls on members to debate it in their branches. The UK National Union of Journalists calls for 'a boycott of Israeli goods similar to those boycotts in the struggles against apartheid South Africa'.
2008	The UK government initiates measures to label products produced by Israeli firms in the occupied Palestinian territories.
2008-9	Operation Cast Lead, a three-week attack by Israeli forces in response to rockets launched from Gaza, kills an estimated 1,400 Palestinians and 13 Israelis.
2009	After the Israeli attack on Gaza, a joint letter by hundreds of UK academics to the <i>Guardian</i> calls on the British government and people to take all feasible steps to stop Israel's 'military aggression and colonial occupation' of the Palestinian territories, starting with a programme of boycott, divestment and sanctions. The Belgian government decides to stop exporting weapons to Israel. The Irish Congress of Trade Unions launches a boycott of Israeli goods. The British Trades Union Congress endorses an initiative to boycott products originating from occupied Palestine.
2010	The Israeli government spends \$6.3 billion on settlements in the occupied territories.
2011	Trade between Israel and the European Union amounts to almost €30 billion. The EU is Israel's main source of imports (34.5%) and its second largest market for exports (26.1%) after the USA.
2012	The New Zealand government superannuation fund excludes two companies for involvement in Israeli settlements in occupied Palestine and one company for involvement in the separation wall, citing UN findings of their illegality. The UN General Assembly votes 138 to 9, with 41 abstentions, to recognize Palestine as a 'non-member observer state'. Among those voting against: Israel, USA, Canada. Abstaining: UK, Germany, Australia. For: China, Russia, India. Israel outlaws public calls for any boycott of Israel or 'a territory ruled by Israel', permitting any economically affected citizen to sue for unlimited damages. A French appeal court rules that calling for a boycott of Israeli products is discrimination based on nationality.
2013	A UK court rules that the University and College Union's 2007 recommendation that its members meet to discuss the boycott is not anti-Semitic. The separation wall reaches 440 km in length with 522 checkpoints, dividing the West Bank into 167 walled enclaves. 53,000 Israeli settler homes have been built since 1993. These settlers are included in a total Israeli population of 8 million, of whom 20% are Arab. The Arab population in the occupied Palestinian territories numbers about 4 million. The Middle East Studies Association of North America complains to Israeli prime minister Netanyahu that Israeli restrictions of movement in the occupied territories 'impede, and in some cases prevent, the regular functioning of courses, university activities and campus life at Palestinian institutions'. Australian prime minister Julia Gillard states her government's opposition to the BDS movement. Prior to the federal election, Liberal Party deputy leader Julie Bishop

promises to cut off federal grants for individuals and institutions supporting the BDS campaign.

The European Union issues guidelines stating that agreements between Israel and the EU do not apply to the occupied territories. Member states are prohibited from cooperating with or transferring funds, scholarships and research grants to Israeli institutions in the occupied territories of the West Bank, eastern Jerusalem and the Golan Heights.

The Association for Asian American Studies and the Native American and Indigenous Studies Association call for a boycott of Israeli universities.

A poll of the membership of the American Studies Association results in a 66% vote for an academic boycott. Over 80 university presidents condemn it. So do eight past ASA presidents.

The Dutch pension fund PGGM disposes of its holdings in five Israeli banks allegedly financing settlements in the occupied territories.

2014 January: By a vote of 56 to 4, the New York State Senate passes a bill prohibiting state colleges and universities from funding academic groups that support boycotting Israel.

134 members of the US Congress denounce the ASA resolution as 'thinly veiled bigotry'.

At the annual conference of the Modern Language Association (MLA), a panel passes a resolution criticizing Israel's harassment of US scholars trying to work in Palestine. It will now be offered to a vote of the entire 38,000 membership.

Israel's finance minister warns that even a limited trade boycott could reduce its exports to the European Union by 20% or \$5.7 billion annually.

US Secretary of State John Kerry warns that a failure in Israel-Palestine peace talks could lead to global boycotts.

February: In response to claims that the withholding of funds to academic organizations who support the boycott would itself 'contradict the tenets of academic freedom' and violate First Amendment protection for political boycotts, the New York State Assembly withdraws the bill passed by the State Senate.

The ASA reports 625 new members in the two months since the boycott resolution, raising 'more revenue' in that period 'than in any two months period in the last 25 years'.

interest in US culture. As it closed, a highly regarded department of film, specializing in European, Asian and North American cinema, rose in its stead. Meanwhile, the election of a young, black and ostensibly hip US president has been cited as the impetus for a post-2009 revival in national student recruitment, and at least one new department has been inaugurated in the past academic year, at the University of Northumbria.

Somewhat belatedly, and a little unevenly, these British developments participate in three widely acknowledged trends in the field: towards (1) a pluralist approach to American culture, and indeed to the many Americas themselves; (2) the interrogation of imperial fantasies of US exceptionality and indispensability; and (3) the dizzying displacements of the vernacular and the global in the field's international turn. In recounting these I am admittedly going backward to the futures of American studies charted by scholars like Brian Edwards and Dilip Gaonkar in the 2010 collection *Globalizing American Studies* and their notable predecessors as long ago as Jay Mechling in 1991 and Gene Wise twelve years before that in his much-cited essay "'Paradigm Dramas" in American Studies'. In their 2002 review of the field's history, Donald Pease and Robyn Wiegman further complicate any attempt at a linear chronology by stressing the temporal as well as the spatial heterogeneity of 'the problematic of present futures and past presents' in articulating what they title *The Futures of American Studies*.

Settler colonialism

If these analytic moves weren't vertiginous enough, that volume's penultimate contributor, Eric Cheyfitz, declares them all irrelevant in the face of 'the socioeconomic inequalities that are part and parcel' of higher education under capitalism, particularly in the USA. Here Cheyfitz lists a rather different set of trends: (1) the reversal of popular access to US higher education since the 1980s; (2) the disarticulation of multicultural curricula from class – from the very economic system that prevents the subjects of these varied cultures from studying them; (3) the universities' replacement of secondary schools as mechanisms of status assignment; and (4) the consequent focus on vocational training for all but the elite. Employing a term used increasingly in recent years, Cheyfitz describes the naturalization of unequal education as a form of 'settlement':

I use the word *settled* because of its special resonance in the rhetoric of American ideology: the notion of settlement, in the sense of settling a 'wilderness,' creating plantations, which in the formative seventeenth century meant establishing a colony ... U.S. settlement was and continues to be based on land stolen from Indians ... U.S. settlement could not proceed without the slave labor of Africans.¹

From a postcolonial scholar like Cheyfitz, the selection of 'settlement' to designate this institutionalized inequality is clearly provocative. In popular parlance to 'settle' can mean to arrange, to pay, to rest, to resolve, to terminate or to defeat – 'to settle one's hash'. In historical terminology 'settler colonialism' is freighted with what Patrick Wolfe calls 'the logic of elimination' whose 'primary motive [is] access to territory'. Partaking in the analytical reach of habitus as an acquired structure of the mind, settlement seeks ratification as a *fait accompli*, as 'facts on the ground'.²

Attempting to unsettle the prevailing injustices of their own universities, ASA members have invoked these understandings in their attention to the conjuncture in and against which they labour, notably in a symposium on 'Activism and Academia' published in a 2012 edition of the Association's journal, *American Quarterly*.³ Ten years after the reversals Cheyfitz lamented, the contributors report the constraints on activism of an 'exhausting workload, the frantic pace of the academic calendar, the fear of institutional reprisals, and the unrelenting stress' (816) as well as – presciently – 'right-wing attempts ... to record and publicize controversial lectures and public statements by academics they oppose' (820). They also, however, list practical achievements, such as the considerable contribution made by the Barnard Center for Research on Women to the passage in 2010 of the New York State Domestic Workers' Bill of Rights, 'the first legislation passed in the United States to offer basic workplace protections to domestic workers' (829). But both failure and success are accompanied in this symposium by a critique of the continuing colonial role of higher education in North America. Scott Morgenson opens with the claim that 'the academy forms within settler societies as an apparatus of colonization.' A teacher of Indigenous students in Canada, Morgenson stresses the activist effects of their diverse archives and experiences – 'stories, representations, relationships and ceremonies' in combating 'the colonial conditions of knowledge production' (806). Commenting on similar struggles in his California university (UC Riverside), Dylan Rodriguez praises American studies' 'rehistoricization' of 'settler-colonialist power, and gendered racist state violence' (812).

Settler colonialism is typically understood as the takeover of a territory by foreign workers who remain and reproduce. Although the imperialist authorities that enable the takeover may not share the settlers' nationality, they justify it in the name of political alliance and common culture, a culture deemed superior to that of the natives. Unlike those forms of colonization which end with liberation or withdrawal, and unlike some other forms of economic migrancy, settler colonization is intended to be permanent and often results in the expulsion or extermination of the native

inhabitants. Historians trace this phenomenon back to the ancient city-states founded across the Mediterranean by Greek colonists or the Roman settlements populated by former soldiers after conquest. In 1967 – just before the Six Day War – the French historian Maxime Rodinson claimed in *Les Temps Modernes* that contemporary Israel was also a colonial settler state.

Rodinson was a Jew whose parents had died in Auschwitz, but he was also an Arabist – the biographer of Muhammad, an expert on the economy of the Arab Middle Ages and on Arab nationalism in the twentieth century. In describing Israel as a ‘colonial fact’, he noted how the early Zionists had appealed for support to the British, who held the post-World War I mandate for the territory, and before that to the Turks, who ruled Palestine as part of the Ottoman Empire, but not to the actual inhabitants of the place on which they sought to build their state. Theodore Herzl, the principal founder of modern Zionism, proposed a Jewish state in Palestine as an outpost of European civilization against Asiatic barbarism. And, like Ben Gurion after him, he anticipated that its foundation would require the transfer ‘of the poor population across the border unnoticed, procuring employment for it in the transit countries, but denying any employment in our own country’.⁴

To explain how this phenomenon feeds into the interconnections described here, I am aided by Maya Mikdashi, a Columbia doctoral student of Lebanese, Swedish and Chippewa descent who declined that university’s offer of ‘a minority scholarship given to those who have maybe been once to a reservation, but have the requisite blood quota to allow a university to claim diversity points’. (Columbia offered her a minority scholarship as a Native American, but not as an Arab American.) Writing of her maternal grandfather, ‘who purposely did not speak of his native ancestry to his children, seeking to protect them, and perhaps himself, from what had already hurt him’, Mikdashi recalls:

I grew up thinking about, and struggling against, settler colonialism in Palestine, not the United States. In fact, it was through Palestine that I came to rethink and question my mother’s family history... It was only after I understood that Israel is a settler colony that I came to see the United States as the same... In the United States, settler colonialism has been so complete, and so successful, that the world has forgotten South Africa, Australia and Israel are all reproductions, all approximations of the ongoing victory back home... Do I deserve to feel anything beyond intellectual outrage when I read about the massacres, displacements and exterminations of Native Americans, particularly if this reading is done in the pristine classrooms of an Ivy League institution named in honor of Christopher Columbus?⁵

Political posturing

Mikdashi’s questions about what feelings we privileged academics are entitled to have about other people’s oppression are echoed in the *American Quarterly* discussion of academia and activism. Matthew Garrett regards these ‘oozings of affect’ as a symptom of professional isolation – ‘an unfortunate and integral part of our current situation, in which intellectual opposition to capitalism is largely produced within an academic environment that obscures or neutralizes connections between the conditions of academic work and the conditions tout court’ (795). And even when the conditions of academic work are pretty terrible – he mentions the ‘renewed instrumentalization of higher education, and towering student debt’ – complaining about them, he notes, can simply enhance your CV. Here Garrett quotes Fred Moten and Stefano Harney saying – ten years ago – that ‘to be critical of the university would make one the professional par excellence’ (797). A non-academic contributor, college dropout and queer activist, Matilda Bernstein Sycamore, makes a related point: ‘academics often appropriate anything they get their hands on – especially people’s lived struggles, identities, methods of activism, and other challenges to the status quo – and then claim to have invented the whole package.’ (833)

Elsewhere in the symposium, Janet Jakobsen and Mara Kaufman chart the symmetries and even synergies that contradict the assumption of a necessary political divide between academia and activism. ‘In the name of community service’, Jakobsen observes, ‘students participate in programs where they learn to manage the lives of those without access to college education’ (827). And Kaufman lists the professionalized transformation of both academics and activists into ‘self-managed human capital’, their *pas de deux* to the rhythm of grant applications and their institutional impetus to suppress any social entanglements that exceed their control.



What cannot be discerned in this discussion is a party line on academic activism or any dearth of self-criticism. The accusation that the ASA resolution is – in the phrase of former Harvard president and Secretary of the Treasury Larry Summers – ‘anti-Semitic in effect if not in intent’, scapegoating Israel while ignoring injustices closer to home, is contradicted both by the research invoked in the symposium and by earlier resolutions posted on the Association’s website. These include a 2006 call for withdrawal from Iraq and what even one critic admits is a whole cluster adopted in the wake of the Occupy movement, covering student protest and intellectual freedom in a time of economic crisis and one adopted in the wake of 9/11, treating intellectual freedom in a time of war. On this evidence alone, it would be absurd to complain that the ASA has singled out Israel in lieu of any attention to other injustices perpetrated in and by the USA, and indeed by their own universities. Moreover, as University of California law professor George Bisharat argued in the *Chicago Tribune*,

There has never been a ‘worst first’ rule for boycotts. Activists urging divestment from apartheid South Africa were not racist because they failed to simultaneously condemn

the demonstrably worse Cambodian dictator Pol Pot. Nor were U.S. civil rights protesters required to inventory the world and only protest if our nation exceeded the abuses of others. Boycotts are justified whenever they are necessary and promise results.

There are sound reasons that U.S. citizens should respond to the Palestinians’ appeal for support: Our country is Israel’s principal – and often sole – defender in the international area. Our diplomats have vetoed more than 40 U.N. Security Council resolutions critical of Israeli practices, including illegal settlement of the West Bank. Former U.S. ambassador to the U.N. Susan Rice, upon leaving office, described shielding Israel as a ‘huge part’ of her work.⁶

Nor in this case can the accusations of political posturing really stand. The sheer uproar that greeted the ASA resolution makes it difficult to claim that it has been promulgated without risk or effect. The far-reaching powers of the Israel lobby have hitherto chilled public criticism of the occupation inside the USA, and the punitive reactions of both politicians and university presidents, although unlikely to prevail against the constitutional protection for boycotts as legal expression, have been ominous. Yet again, one well-known defender of the resolution, Judith Butler, has had to cancel a public appearance in the face of her critics’ determination to disrupt it – this time, somewhat ironically, a discussion of Kafka at the Jewish Museum in New York. But since the ASA vote, voices like hers have become louder and more numerous, with the boycott – and the conditions it opposes – increasingly the subject of US

newspaper editorials and legislative debate as well as worried acknowledgements of its delegitimizing effects inside Israel. Coincidentally or not, in February its Supreme Court began to consider Gush Shalom's appeal against the law prohibiting any Israeli citizen's support for such measures.

Burden of history

There is no reference to Israel or Palestine in Pease and Wiegman's collection *The Futures of American Studies*. When it was published in 2002 very little of this history was an issue for Americans, or even for Americanists. It became one, of course, with the sequence of events that motivated the other resolutions on the ASA website – 9/11, the war in Iraq and the subsequent economic collapse that prompted the Occupy movement, future cataclysms which the contributors to that very capacious volume could not have foreseen. Sigmund Freud, however, had an inkling that things would not go well if a new Jewish state was established in Palestine. When, in 1930, the Zionist movement sought to recruit his support, he wrote to one of its leaders, Dr Chaim Koffler, citing his concern at the 'awakening of Arab distrust':

It would have seemed more sensible to me to establish a Jewish homeland on a less historically-burdened land.

Reflecting on that burden, Gene Wise wrote in the 1970s that American studies demanded a 'connecting mind' to understand 'the inescapable power of the past ... a people which presumes to outrun its history never does so in fact'.⁷ In their overview of the field's subsequent theoretical development, the editors of *The Futures of American Studies* expand his coordinates of movement and stasis to model American studies' contested temporalities: where one school of thought suggests that the field is moving forward, another rejects that idea; a third returns to 'subaltern political pasts to materialize alternative futures', while a fourth anticipates the way those futures may merely establish a new set of hegemonies. Again, there is no orthodoxy in evidence, no self-congratulation on an academic mission accomplished.

Pease and Wiegman call these multiple temporalities 'heterochronic',⁸ a term which returns me to Maya Mikdashi's discovery that her concern with contemporary Arab oppression could lead her backward, to a painful recognition of the unspoken suffering of her Chippewa grandfather. Freud termed this belated registration of trauma *Nachträglichkeit*, 'afterwardness': the rearrangement of memory traces under new circumstances, a 'retranscription'. For Freud's psychic retranscription, we might read Dylan Rodriguez extolling the painful scholarship that 'rehistoricizes' American 'regimes of incarceration, war, sexuality, settler-colonialist power'. American studies, as Pease and Wiegman remind us, is always being rewritten, as is the meaning of 'America' itself. The re-examination of its colonialism will continue into the field's future – because of its pertinence to America's past but also because of its purchase on the present.

In one of the many ironies of this affair, this new American studies has now received a sympathetic examination from a quarter not previously distinguished for its engagement with radical scholarship or criticism of Israel. Writing in the *New York Times* this April, Sam Tanenhaus reviews the widespread academic denunciations of the resolution and the attempts in seven US states to defund or condemn its perpetrators. He notes the complaints of 'ideological overdrive' by its academic opponents, but then examines the arguments for the transnational turn as 'a necessary corrective in the new globalist era'. Citing American literary scholar Amy Kaplan, he observes that

In the post-superpower age, the United States looks increasingly like other nations that have recent origins and troubled ethnic histories – for instance, Australia and Argentina, New Zealand and South Africa. And Israel, too. Connections might be drawn between

'settler colonialism' in the Old West (its 'virgin land' the habitat of Indians and Mexicans) and Israel's settlements on the West Bank. And that connection is not just hypothetical. 'Some of the actual companies that have built the fences on the Mexican border are also involved in barriers in Israel and Palestine,' Dr. Kaplan said.

If Tanenhaus then reverts to an affectionate rendition of small-stakes politics in the ivory tower, he nevertheless points out that American studies might have a future, even without American exceptionalism. At Yale, he reports, it is the third most popular humanities major after history and English, attracting a new generation of students 'eager to learn "what's American about America," even if no one really knows the answer.'⁹

Notes

This article is based on a presentation to 'The Futures of American Studies', DSA Annual Conference, Department of English, University of Delhi, 3–5 March 2014. Thanks to the organizers of that event.

1. Eric Cheyfitz, 'The End of Academia', in Donald E. Pease and Robyn Wiegman, eds, *The Futures of American Studies*, Duke University Press, Durham NC, 2002, p. 529.
2. Patrick Wolfe, 'Settler Colonialism and the Elimination of the Native', *Journal of Genocidal Research*, vol. 8, no. 4, 2006, pp. 387–93.
3. 'Activism and Academia' Symposium, *American Quarterly*, vol. 64, no. 4, 2012; page references to this symposium appear in the main text.
4. See Ilan Pappé, *The Ethnic Cleansing of Palestine*, Oneworld, Oxford, 2006, p. 250.
5. Maya Mikdashi, 'What Is Settler Colonialism?', www.jadaliyya.com/pages/index/6553/what-is-settler-colonialism.
6. George Bisharat, 'Applause for the Academic Boycott of Israel', articles.chicagotribune.com/2014-01-30.
7. Gene Wise, "'Paradigm Dramas' in American Studies", *American Quarterly*, vol. 31, no. 3, 1979, p. 336.
8. Donald E. Pease and Robyn Wiegman, 'Futures', in Pease and Wiegman, eds, *The Futures of American Studies*, p. 37.
9. Sam Tanenhaus, 'Looking for America Beyond Its Borders', www.nytimes.com/2014/04/13/education/edlife/looking-for-america-beyond-its-border.

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