

Sunaina Maira, *Boycott! The Academy and Justice for Palestine*, (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2018), pp. 184.

by Jacob Eriksson

The Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions movement, or BDS, has rapidly become a new staple in the global discourse on Israel and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Sunaina Maira’s book tells the story of the birth and the growth of the academic boycott movement in the USA, charting its development across multiple different scholarly associations. It places BDS within a history of boycott movements, such as the classic South African case but also within the Palestinian struggle against the British during the Mandate period, and draws parallels to different US campaigns such as the civil rights movement and indigenous rights movements in the US. It is interesting to read the reflections of members of the movement, garnered through interviews, and the narrative of the founding of the US Campaign for the Academic and Cultural Boycott of Israel (USACBI) is highly readable (even if the acronyms of the many associations are sometimes difficult to keep track of). The penultimate chapter charts the backlash against the BDS movement, while the final chapter examines the broader relationship between BDS and resistance to the “neo-liberal university.”

Maira distinguishes between the academic, cultural, and economic boycott of Israel, but the reasons for the academic boycott specifically would be helpful to discuss in further detail. The case for the academic boycott appears to be one of broader solidarity based on Palestinian requests rather than an argument for the effectiveness or necessity of this particular type of boycott. She quotes Omar Barghouti, co-founder of the Palestinian Campaign for the Academic and Cultural Boycott of Israel (PACBI), who argues that “Israel’s academic institutions have, after all, been one of the pillars of Israel’s regime of oppression, playing a major role in planning, implementing, justifying, and whitewashing Israel’s crimes against the Palestinian people” (p. 87). This is also echoed in USACBI’s mission statement (pp. 8-10). However, this claim would be strengthened by providing examples of how this has been done, particularly the planning and implementing claims which are less immediately obvious than, say, academic contributions to Israeli narratives of the conflict and its history.

The relationship between the university as an institution funded by the state and the policies of that state is not linear, but complex. University faculty tend to represent more liberal strands of society, and one can argue that this is also true of

Israel. A law professor at Bar Ilan University was castigated by his Faculty Dean for expressing sympathy with all victims on both sides of the war between Israel and Hamas in Gaza in 2014.¹ The Coordinating Council of the University Faculty Associations in Israel responded to the exchange by arguing that freedom of expression and the right to protest needed to be respected.² Indeed, Israeli academia has a long, rich tradition of criticizing the policies of the state, and the so-called “New Historians” have done a great deal to question the traditional nationalist narratives. Maira is critical of those who argue that an academic boycott would target a progressive community. She makes clear that the boycott is of academic institutions rather than individuals, which is important when evaluating accusations of anti-Semitism, but the role of the institutions needs further clarification to make the case convincing.

Maira also focuses on the connection between the US government and the governance structures of US universities, and how power is exerted upon the academic community. This argument would be significantly strengthened by providing evidence of this beyond the statements of certain academic associations or individuals involved in them. The chapter entitled “Backlash” sheds light on the relationship between the Israel lobby, think tanks, and anti-BDS activism, for example when considering the issue of “lawfare” and civil rights cases, which is illustrative. The case of Steven Salaita considered in the final chapter is also indicative, but a deeper examination of the context, the actions taken by different actors involved, and how exactly the institutional establishment worked against Salaita and others would be helpful. More broadly, the nature of government and university influence, and how it manifests itself in practice, could be more clearly explained. Is there a difference between private and state universities in this regard? These structures and relationships may be obvious to scholars within the US academy with experience of it, but not necessarily to a more international readership.

Using the words of a fellow boycott organizer, Maira argues that the boycott is a tool, not the end goal. The question remains, what exactly is that end goal, and how does it relate to the question of the one-state or two-state solutions, which

¹ “Bar-Ilan University Rebukes Professor for Expressing Concern for Both Palestinian and Israeli Victims,” *The Association for Civil Rights in Israel*, July 31, 2014, <https://law.acri.org.il/en/2014/07/31/bar-ilan-gaza/>

² Aron Donzis, “Academic rebuked for expressing sympathy for Gaza victims,” *The Times of Israel*, July 30, 2014, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/academic-rebuked-for-expressing-sympathy-for-gaza-victims/>.

the movement argues it is agnostic about? Reflection on this portion of the debate, that BDS is tantamount to calling for the end of the state of Israel, would be interesting to elicit, particularly as she acknowledges the right to self-determination as a crucial collective right but argues that Zionism is racism.³

Whatever your view on BDS, this thought-provoking book is likely to animate you. Those sympathetic to the movement will love it, and consider it an important contribution to its literature. Those against it will hate it, and describe it as further evidence of radical (leftist) invective against the state of Israel. Whether or not it will convince those who are not part of the boycott movement to join it is another question entirely.

Jacob Eriksson, University of York

How to quote this article:

*Jacob Eriksson, Review of *Boycott! The Academy and Justice for Palestine*, by Sunaina Maira in *Quest. Issues in Contemporary Jewish History*, n. 15 August 2019
url: www.quest-cdecjournal.it/reviews.php?id=145*

³ See p. 115 for the articulation of self-determination as a collective right, and p. 116 for discussion of Zionism as racism.