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There's No Academic Freedom Without Institutional Means

By Chad Alan Goldberg

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The boycott recently endorsed by the American Studies Association, its supporters emphasize, is aimed only at Israeli academic institutions and not at individual scholars. As Judith Butler [explained](#) in *The Nation* in December, “any Israeli, Jewish or not, is free to come to a conference, to submit his or her work to a journal, and to enter into any form of scholarly exchange. The only request that is being made is that no institutional funding from Israeli institutions be used for the purposes of those activities.” Butler argues that such a request does not infringe upon the Israeli scholar’s academic freedom because that scholar can pay from her “own personal funds” or ask others to pay for her. Personal funds presumably come from the salary paid to the Israeli scholar by her institution, but for Butler money apparently ceases to be institutional once it changes hands.

One wonders why that same reasoning doesn’t apply to conference or travel funds furnished by an Israeli university. One also wonders how many ASA members are willing to raise their own dues or earmark a portion of their current dues to pay for the participation of Israeli colleagues in the activities of their organization. Furthermore, one wonders why

Butler, who has raised concerns about new forms of effective censorship exercised by private donors, does not have similar concerns about the donors who might pay for Israeli colleagues.

But the most serious problem with Butler's proposal is that it imposes special costs and burdens on Israeli scholars, creating substantive inequalities that undermine the formally equal and universal freedoms that she is eager to affirm for everyone in the abstract. While scholars of other nationalities may use the resources of their institutions, Israeli scholars must make do with their own private means or rely upon charity; they enjoy equal academic freedom in the same way that the rich and the poor are equally free to hold an unpaid office. For the generously paid academic aristocracy at elite institutions, using one's own personal funds may be only an "inconvenience" (Butler's word) rather than a hardship. However, not all academics have personal resources in such abundance, and those with fewer personal resources are more dependent on institutional funding.

Because "academic freedom can only be exercised when the material conditions for exercising those rights are secured," Butler has argued, the academic freedom of Palestinians is vitiated by the conditions of Israeli military occupation. She is indeed right, but the remedy for military occupation is a negotiated peace, not an effort to deprive Israelis of the material conditions for their academic freedom. Butler seems not to understand how her point militates against her own demand that Israeli scholars become *luftmenschen*. The distinction between an institutional and an individual boycott only makes sense in a world of abstract universalism, where Israeli scholars are entitled to academic freedom in a formal sense without equal access to the institutional means and resources they need to realize it in practice.

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