

Savage Minds

Notes and Queries in Anthropology

Anthropology and the Boycott of Israeli Academic Institutions: Mick Taussig and J. Lorand Matory

🕒 June 3, 2015

👤 Jessica Winegar

Savage Minds welcomes guest blogger **Anthropologists for the Boycott of Israeli Academic Institutions**.

We are pleased to present the following two reflections by **Mick Taussig** and **J. Lorand Matory** as part of a two-week guest blog series entitled Anthropology and the Boycott of Israeli Academic Institutions. These reflections on why anthropologists should support the boycott join similar statements by **Steven Caton** and **Talal Asad**.

Why I Urge Support for BDS

Mick Taussig

Class of 1933 Professor of Anthropology, Columbia University

The issue seems not so much why support; but how could you not?

The situation in the US has gotten to the point where the slightest criticism of the Israeli state's ugly excesses is taken as heresy and this applies with stinging force to university life. Trustees of US universities are on record now as firing or quietly threatening hires of professors.

How dare they! And we are punished for asking for divestment and boycotts!

Untenured and even some tenured professors are afraid to sign petitions or get involved in pro-Palestinian activities, student councils are charged, predictably, as "anti-semitic" if they challenge the Israeli occupation of Palestine, and Students for Justice in Palestine groups are targeted and banned by college presidents as causing "discomfort" to Jewish students. That is why it is so important that academic associations weigh in loud and clear as counter-voices to create, at the least, a level playing field.

Visiting the West Bank in 2013 I found what at best could be called an open prison apartheid society with micro-management of everyday life by the Israeli state apparatus. I met many Palestinians who could not travel to Jerusalem or see the sea. And this in their own land which they have occupied for millennia! Nearly all Palestinians living in the West Bank and Gaza cannot participate in Israeli academia and cannot visit Israeli universities. So if there is not academic freedom for all, why not BDS until there is?

Putting it plain: it is 100% a colonial, racially sustained, occupation, largely paid for by the US, a sadistic game played by a paranoid bully for whom means have now become ends spiraling out of control over which the Israeli state has lost control; witness what niceties emerged with the last election and the attack on Gaza.

The expanding settlements dominate the hills along with military watchtowers. Wherever you go, the serpentine wall is there as a fact of nature, even dividing the living from their dead. (And these wall builders have the nerve to rant about tunnels!) I visited Palestinian farmers denied the use of subterranean water for their crops in this "land without people for a people without land."

The irony of that! Along with the unscrupulous use of the holocaust. As the descendant of a family whose members died in Auschwitz I am overwhelmed by shame.

And that is why I say the issue is not so much why support; but how

could you not?

J. Lorand Matory

Lawrence Richardson Professor of Anthropology and African American Studies, Duke University

Hurt people hurt people.

But the people they hurt the most are seldom the people who first and most hurt them. In fact, the oppressed often imitate their oppressors and pass the cruelty on to a more vulnerable party.

But, as scientists alert to such cross-cultural phenomena, we must not stand by and watch, even though we will sometimes pay a price for speaking out.

The logic that aggrieved Westerners have the right to safe havens stolen from non-Westerners is old. It prompted the founding of the United States, but this idea has long belonged in the dustbin of history. Before Israel, the latest similar case in memory was in 1821, when freed African American slaves founded Liberia, a settler colony similarly dependent on the US-sponsored displacement and bloody oppression of the indigenous population. The Liberian situation has not ended well. Nor will Israel's.

Since its founding 1948, Israel's impunity and the morally blind backing of the world's greatest superpower have convinced many aggrieved parties in the world that the global post-WWII consensus against colonialism and in favor of equal rights for all is hollow. In such a world, money and might remain right, and many parties to the world's proliferating conflicts have concluded that their grievances against the guilty justify proxy violence against the innocent.

Unlike the similar boycott against South African institutions in the 1970s and '80s, a boycott against the Israeli academy may be too little

too late to derail the evil trajectory before us. But at least the world will know that we anthropologists do not agree that hurt people have the right to hurt people and, in so doing, put us all at risk.

That is why I signed.

Readers may also be interested in the FAQ **Boycotting Israeli Academic Institutions: 5 Reasons and 5 Myths**, and anthropologist **Randa Farah's** essay **connecting the importance of boycott to the Nakba**, the catastrophic expulsion of Palestinians from their lands in 1948.

For more information on the academic boycott movement, and to sign the statement pledging to boycott Israeli academic institutions until they end their complicity in violating Palestinian rights as stipulated in international law, visit **Anthropologists for the Boycott of Israeli Academic Institutions**.

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