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The Symbolic Violence of Choice

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"Hasn't he got any patriotism?" [Colonel Cathcart asked].

"Won't you fight for your country?" Colonel Korn demanded. "Won't you give up your life for Colonel Cathcart and me?"

Yossarian tensed with astonishment.

"What's that?" he exclaimed. "What have you and Colonel Cathcart got to do with my country? You're not the same."

"How can you separate us?" Colonel Korn inquired with ironical tranquility.

"That's right," Colonel Cathcart cried emphatically. "You're either for us or against us. There's no two ways about it."

"I'm afraid he's got you," added Colonel Korn. "You're either for us or against your country. It's as simple as that."

"Oh, no, Colonel. I don't buy that."

Colonel Korn was unruffled. "Neither do I, frankly, but everyone else will. So there you are."

—Joseph Heller, *Catch-22*

Pierre Bourdieu wrote that symbolic violence is exercised through the "hypnotic power" of "injunctions, suggestions, seduction, threats, reproaches, orders or calls to order" that emerge within the structures of domination that shape our perception and activity. We help reproduce those structures whenever we speak in their terms, are moved by their claims, and follow the channels they establish. The AAA's discussions of a proposed boycott of Israeli academic institutions are a good example of how such symbolic violence is accomplished. These discussions have drawn up sides which resist both ethnographic and theoretical illumination. They have chained the possibility of thought to the imperative of duty by deploying the irresistible vocabulary of justice and complicity, loyalty and betrayal, virtue and sin. You are either with us or against human values.

You are presented with a choice. Interestingly, the choice isn't actually about working to end the suffering of Palestinians. You don't need the AAA for that; the long worldwide boycott of South Africa proceeded without AAA endorsement. Moreover, given the structural constraints on universities, the specific conditions outlined in the current call for academic boycott are impossible to achieve (Rabinowitz, *AN*), and more broadly, according to Noam Chomsky (*The Nation* July 2, 2014), some elements of the overall boycott movement's goals are "a virtual guarantee of failure."

The decision you're being asked to make has to do with two things. First, it's about whether or not to take seriously what we know about social theory, identity and historical context: e.g., that individuals are inseparable from their institutions, and that identities are complex and groups heterogeneous. Second, in a practical sense it's about deciding *who you want to be*, and that isn't a matter of what you think or what you do. It's

a matter of what kinds of thoughts, motives, and values people attribute to the collectives you belong to. It's about how lines are drawn in the sand.

If you vote "No" on the resolution, you will signal your approval of Jewish settler-colonialism in Palestine, the strengthening of violent ethnonationalism, forced segregation, deprivation of rights, direct and structural racism, land and resource theft, dehumanization, mass imprisonment, murder, and the hypocritical American foreign policy that supports it all. If you vote "Yes" on the resolution, you will mark yourself as someone who once again identifies Jews as the cause of the world's problems and seeks to destroy the state that protects them, who ignores liberal values of diversity, tolerance, and dialogue, who unjustly lumps together progressive Israeli activists with the worst of their violent racist countrymen, and who ignores the hypocrisy inherent in Americans criticizing Israel for bad Middle East policy while they materially support the murder of civilians in Iraq, Yemen, Pakistan and Palestine with every tax dollar. You get to choose, in other words, whether you'd rather be a right-wing Zionist or an anti-Semite. (You get to be a racist and a hypocrite either way).

If you refuse the choice because you recognize it as a false dichotomy, or because you don't care one way or the other, you can breathe a sigh of relief and get back to your own work, convinced that you have transcended both the nasty politics of the discipline and the much nastier and more consequential politics of the world. But you will also have voted "Yes" by default, because the supporters of the boycott resolution will easily deliver all the votes they need to approve the boycott resolution and one is always responsible for the actions of the groups with which one identifies (I don't buy that logic, frankly, but everyone else will. So there you are).

Members of the American Studies Association learned this in mid-December 2013 when they voted to approve the Palestinian civil society organizations' call for a boycott of Israeli academic institutions. Of 1,252 votes cast, 827 favored the resolution. That overwhelming majority constituted a bit more than sixteen percent of the ASA's roughly 5,000 members. In January 2014 state legislators in Maryland and New York introduced bills to defund universities which paid for their employees' meeting travel or membership in organizations endorsing academic boycotts. The bills were wildly popular in committee and floor votes, but they did not ultimately become law. In February Congressmen Peter Roskam and Daniel Lipinski of Illinois introduced HR 4009, the outrageously mislabeled "Protect Academic Freedom Act," to Congress, barring the US Department of Education

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from providing financial assistance to academic institutions boycotting Israel. That bill died in committee.

“Statement bills” such as these allow legislators to signal their constituencies about issues they might care about. In that sense, they are rather like AAA resolutions. The difference is that, while there is little chance that anthropologists boycotting Israel will enhance the quality of life in Palestine, statement bills occasionally do work their way into law (see “Abortion, Texas” and “Immigration, Arizona”). Most anthropologists boycott Israel by default simply by having no connection to it, so signing on costs little. But voting to have AAA approve the academic boycott will make us feel like we’re *doing* something. It will communicate our virtue. It will link us to a larger movement by placing our disciplinary organization on an exclusive list, just as signing petitions can make us feel like agents of human liberation even if we do nothing else. AAA approval of the boycott will symbolically purify the discipline of the stench of complicity with Zionism.

And because this is an election year, our symbolic purge will be followed by a new wave of bills in our state legislatures and in Congress, egged on by the real apologists for settler-colonial violence: lobbyists and politicians who have nothing to lose and everything to gain by pointing conveniently past the atrocities visited on Palestinians to the distracting and shameful

spectacle of “anthropologists” (whatever those are) counseling the extermination of the Jews. In Florida, North Carolina, and elsewhere where disciplines such as anthropology are already in question, perceptive legislators will propose bills simply to eliminate the nests where such vipers lay their eggs. Governors will quiver happily at the prospect of signing them in the name of wise budgeting and “academic freedom.”

Apart from that, nothing much is likely to change. The dire, chronic violations of Palestinian rights in Israel and its settler-colonial frontier west of the Jordan River will remain. Reactionary movements in the US seeking to silence discussions of those violations through a “Palestine Exception” to free speech will continue to multiply. At the same time, the intellectually dishonest claim will persist that the tactic of academic boycott actually safeguards the prospects of all our colleagues. “Well of course you Israelis can continue to belong to *our* organization and subscribe to *our* journals, and attend *our* meetings! *Such* a shame, though, that so ‘surprisingly few [of you] have come out in solidarity with [your] Palestinian colleagues, or in open protest against the systematic violation of Palestinian human rights by the Israeli state.’ Tsk, tsk. And what a pity I can’t write you a recommendation. It’s not *you*, really; it’s an *institutional* thing...”

The politics of belonging consumes both those who embrace it and those who would critique it. The discourse of the boycott’s opponents becomes whiny and paranoid, mixing an exasperated recital of “facts,” with reference to the other side’s “convenient lies” and “secret endgames.” The discourse of boycott supporters

becomes an ever more stale and focused repetition of atrocity narratives, and acquires an increasingly messianic pitch. “We” did not choose Israel as a target; it was chosen *by the United States* for special treatment in the first place. “We” did not choose the tactic of boycott; it was chosen for us *by Palestinian civil society*. “We” are merely the agents of larger forces. What does the fate or reputation of a professional organization matter anyway, as one distinguished political scientist asked at a Middle East Studies Association forum in 2014, *if its approval of the academic boycott will finally bring justice and freedom to Palestine?*

Both the supporters and the opponents of the tactic of boycott criticize the horrors of nationalism while furthering nationalism’s work directly and sincerely by framing “solutions” in terms of more of the same: crude identity distinctions, national liberation, and the granting or withholding of collective recognition by states. Unfortunately, whatever it ends up doing or not doing for Palestinians, the AAA’s sadly inadequate framework for discussing their plight has effectively shut down critical thought. It has replaced some of the most important contributions our discipline can offer—including understanding that there are ways of thinking and living beyond the state and beyond nationality—with an oversimplified set of enemy positions in the guise of “choice.”

So get ready. Your ballot arrives soon.

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