BOOK REVIEWS


The act of criticising Israel has been at the forefront in the battle for defending academic freedom. In recent years an increasing number of leading scholars around the world have faced baseless, yet devastating, accusations of anti-Semitism because of their legitimate critiques of Israel’s violation of human rights, war crimes, systematic racism, ethnic cleansing, and its overall settler-colonial project in Palestine. Pro-Israel and Zionist lobbyists are leading the war against academic freedom by mobilising various centres of power in and outside the university. The Zionist targeting of academic institutions tends not only to diminish spaces of academic freedom but also to enforce a friendly environment where Israel’s settler-colonial project is mainly perceived in positive terms.

The editors of this book bring together a collection of twelve original essays inspired by a conference entitled ‘Freedom of Speech and Higher Education: The Case of the Academic Boycott of Israel’, which took place at Trinity College Dublin in 2017. Inevitably, the organisers and participants were attacked by various pro-Israel groups before, during, and after the conference. Despite these serious challenges, determination to carry on with the conference’s notable message and to advocate academic freedom has resulted in this invaluable and brave volume. While taking criticism of Israel as the main focus of the debate, the volume sheds light on how the dominant forces within academia tend to suppress academic freedom in neoliberal settings.

The book’s foreword is written by Rabab Abdulhadi, a scholar and staunch advocate of social justice and Palestinian rights. She documents her experience at San Francisco State University (SFSU), where she has been subject to systematic harassment by the Zionist lobby and the university administrators. As a way to silence her voice, the SFSU administrators manipulated free speech to favour Zionists and suppress academic freedom for those working for Palestine.

The editors’ introduction engages in a fruitful discussion concerning academic freedom and how it relates to the academic boycott of Israel. They question the idealist usage of academic freedom, emphasising the materialist conditions defining its boundaries. While the introduction points to disagreement among the volume’s contributors regarding the very meaning and functions of academic freedom, condemning the injustices in Palestine appears to be an unquestionable obligation for progressive scholarship.

Part I, entitled ‘Universities and academic governance’, includes five chapters presenting a variety of perspectives on the institutional context within which the extent of academic freedom, particularly with regard to the Palestinian cause, is determined.

Hilary Aked inaugurates the first part by offering insights into the ideological function of ‘Israeli Studies’, which has been expanding in Western universities in recent decades. The promotion of ‘Israeli Studies’ should be understood as a top-down institutional instrument to relieve Israel’s legitimacy crisis through creating active ‘epistemic
communities’ whose primary objective is to legitimise Israel’s settler-colonial project. Interestingly, Aked contextualises the rise of ‘Israeli Studies’ in relation to the rapid neoliberalisation of academic institutions, which subsequently facilitated ‘donor-led elite intervention... rather than a response to student demand’ (p. 49). This is demonstrated through the Zionist philanthropic foundations, which use their financial leverages to shape the agendas, employment, and overall knowledge production on Israel.

Nick Riemer examines the exclusionary dimension of traditional disciplinarity which undermines progressive tendencies within academia, including Palestine solidarity scholarship. This is evidenced in how pro-Palestine groups on campus are consistently accused of ‘exceeding the boundaries of their disciplinary competence and improperly using their academic authority in the service of a political agenda’ (p. 71).

Disciplinarity can serve in a straightforward way, then, to police pro-Palestine and other progressive advocacy on campus. But to describe this policing, as we might easily be tempted to do, as a political ‘instrumentalization’ of disciplinarity for reactionary purposes, inherently alien to the proper intellectual function of disciplinarity itself would ignore the ways in which the concept does not necessarily serve the ends of knowledge or intellectual progress per se, but of institutional authority and, as a result, exclusion. (pp. 71–72)

David Landy shows how the attack against Israel–critical academics is perceived as a defence of academic freedom. While obviously a paradox, such a Zionist tactic is predicated on ‘discursively placing criticism of Israel outside the academic field’ (p. 93). This allows Zionist propagandists in academia to redefine the criterion of academic goodness, mainly based on the degree of support for Israel, while simultaneously questioning the credentials of critical scholars of Israel. Tala Makhoul brings to attention the status of the US academic institutions in the Arab world, exemplified by the American University of Beirut (AUB), which has witnessed multiple administrative breaches of the BDS principles. Her analysis is primarily based on the dilemma of laws concerning the boycott of Israel in Lebanon and the US. While the AUB administration has been faithfully committed to applying US laws and regulations that criminalise BDS activities, pro-Palestine academics and students have struggled to defy attempts of normalisation and partnership with Israeli institutions. While admitting that her chapter ‘inadvertently paints a rather hopeless picture for the case of the academic boycott in American campuses in the Arab world’ (p. 130), optimism lies in the growing BDS activism and the students’ resistance to normalising Israel’s settler-colonialism. In Ireland, Sinead Pembroke explores the impact of the increasingly precarious employment in academic institutions on activism and critical thinking, which effectively hinders academic freedom and as such effectively narrows down the spaces for participation in the academic boycott of Israel.

Part II, entitled ‘Colonial erasure in higher education’, stimulates discussion on the interaction between colonialism and higher education. John Reynolds studies the ways in which academic freedom is manipulated by traditional powers to promote pro-colonial scholarship while excluding anti-colonial perspectives. He reminds us that ‘for academic freedom to be meaningful, it has to be rooted to an emancipatory political ethic and an underlying claim to justice’ (p. 176). the next two chapters focus on the academic institutions operating under the settler-colonial rule in Palestine. Yara Hawari presents a strategic vision that utilises the boycott tool as part of a larger strategy of liberation and decolonisation. Academic boycott, she contends, ‘must be accompanied by a wider commitment to challenging academic hegemonies which continue to erase native and indigenous experiences’ (p. 189). Ronit Lentin concludes this part by reminding us about the deep complicity of Israeli universities and academics in the Israeli colonisation at
almost every level, in addition to the systematic suppression of Palestinian higher education institutions.

The last part, entitled ‘Interrogating academic freedom’, begins with Jeff Handmaker’s contribution on the legal dimension of academic freedom with regard to BDS, whereby his analysis is based on a distinction between legal mobilisation and lawfare. The usefulness of this analytical framework stems from ‘appreciating the legitimate use of law as a form of counterpower against the powerful, suppressive arm of a state’ (p. 239). Jamil Khader frames the discussion of academic freedom in the context of Žižek’s radical universality because of its potential to mobilise a collective emancipatory struggle that recognizes the universality of Palestinian identity. C. Heike Schotten contextualises the challenges facing the BDS movement in US universities in light of the ‘War on Terror’, which facilitated the Zionist attack on the pro-Palestine justice movement, presenting the arbitrary dismissal of Sami Al-Arian and Steven Salaïta as a case study. Finally, Arianne Shahvisi shows how the dominant power in the university system deploys the term of ‘civility’ in its colonial flavor to silence anti-colonial scholarship and activism for justice in Palestine.

Enforcing Silence: Academic Freedom, Palestine and the Criticism of Israel is highly recommended for scholars, students, journalists, and activists alike. This is an exceptionally solid and essential work on academic freedom and should become a staple of the literature on the Palestine solidarity movement.

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The publication of this weighty tome on Matzpen — the most famous of Israel’s radical political organisations — is indeed welcome. Adding to the many earlier efforts to map the emergence, development and eventual demise of this unique group, requires meticulous research and a thorough understanding of the complexities of Israeli political culture, as well as an open mind when coming to evaluate an ethos and trajectory which are somewhat alien to the researcher. This is especially important to me — appropriate disclosure — I myself was an active member of Matzpen in London until its fading away in the early 1990s.

The first requirement of scholarship — through and methodical research — has been met by Lutz Fiedler, who has carefully examined and scanned all the available material — not just that publicly available but also private notes, correspondence, archives and letters of the surviving leading members of the organisation, and especially Dr Moshe Machover, the co-founder of Matzpen. The rich and essential archive kept by Machover, living in London since 1967, is a virtual treasure trove of information about Matzpen, and Fiedler seems to have made excellent use of this resource. This allows Fiedler to map and describe the complex network of links, friendships and regional political relationships which developed between Machover, Eli Lobel and other Matzpen members in Europe, and a range of internationalist Arab socialist activist intellectuals from across the Middle East — Leila S. Kadi and Sadiq Jalal Al Azm, both related to the Popular Democratic Front for the