

Answering questions about the ASA boycott from Department Chairs, Deans, Administrators, revised 12/17/2013

With the boycott resolution, the ASA takes a principled position while respecting the unique conditions and diverse positions of our membership. The National Council understands that some of the Program Directors and Faculty, and Regional Chapters representatives, may come under particular pressure from your institutions, administrators, or local organizations about the ASA boycott. We emphasize that we uphold your right to say whatever you wish to administrators or university officials who may be hostile to this action. In some circumstance the following general statements may be appropriate:

"While I may not agree/don't know where I stand on the issue, I support the right of scholars and students to take ethical stands on important public issues." Or

"The ASA recognizes the rights of its members to act in accordance with their own conscience and convictions and to disagree with the resolution. As an association that upholds the principle of academic freedom, the ASA exercises no legislative authority over its members."

If you experience confused, puzzled or critical reactions that prove difficult to manage, please contact the ASA office for further assistance.

Below are some suggested responses to particular questions.

What is BDS?

The Boycott/Divestment/Sanctions movement emerged in response to calls from Palestinian civil society organizations to respond to the ongoing situation in the West Bank and Gaza, in which Palestinians live under the defacto military and political control of Israel. The Palestinian Authority is not really in control: does not control the roads, the water, the air space, or access into and out of Palestine. The BDS movement is designed to call attention to the failure of peace negotiations to achieve anything like a secure and sustainable life for Palestinians, and to insist that Israel be held accountable for the situation it effectively controls.

But aren't both sides at fault here?

Both Israel and the Palestinians are guilty of violence against civilians, and both sides could be accused of various failures to negotiate effectively toward peace. But the BDS movement is designed to call attention to Israel's preponderance of power over Palestinian lives, and the daily forms of harassment and violence that Palestinians are subject to every day. The ASA's vote is not designed to say that Israel is entirely at fault, or to ignore the complexities of the conflict. It is, however, designed to point out that Israel has failed to negotiate seriously toward a solution that puts a stop to the

settlements, ends the occupation of the West Bank and Gaza in a meaningful way, and supports a genuine and meaningful Palestinian state.

Lots of countries behave worse than Israel has behaved toward Palestinians. This just looks like selective punishment, singling out Israel because of anti-Israeli or anti-Jewish bias.

It's true that there are many countries in the world with horrific human rights records, many of which profoundly deserve to be boycotted—if boycotting were simply a moral or ethical position. The boycott/divestment/sanctions movement is aimed at putting pressure on Israel to finally end its occupation and to change its behavior toward the Palestinians who live effectively under Israeli control. It is in response to a *call* for boycott and divestment from Palestinian activists—the ASA did not just decide on this strategy but instead joined an international movement. The effectiveness of the campaign depends on the idea that the United States and Israel can be influenced by citizen action.

It makes particular sense for ASA to join the movement because of US military and economic support for Israel. Of course, the US massively supports other violators of human rights, and it might be appropriate for the ASA to consider supporting an organized BDS movement in those cases as well, *if* there were such a movement with meaningful support among those people who are affected.

This is where the parallels with the anti-apartheid movement are most appropriate. Horrific as apartheid was, people could argue—and did—that there were worse horrors in the world during the cold war. But the point was that South African anti-apartheid activists had organized to ask for boycott, divestment, and sanctions against the regime. One did not have to agree with every tactic of the ANC, nor think that South Africa was the only violator of human rights, to agree to support the calls for boycott and divestment.

But why not support a boycott only against the settlements, like Palestinian President Abbas has called for?

President Abbas is talking about an economic boycott against products made in the settlements. This is something that many American and European activists also support (and some Israelis as well). And the Divestment wing of the BDS movement has called for divestment from all companies that do business with the occupation.

The academic boycott focuses on Israeli institutions generally because it is Israel's government overall that maintains the settlement structure and the institutions of occupation (from the separate road system, to the separation wall, to the limits on Palestinian movement). The settlers do not maintain those systems on their own. So this boycott is a response to Israeli government policy, and is designed to call attention precisely to the role of the government overall.

The boycott thus calls attention to the role of the Israeli government in the Palestinian Territories. It does not in any way challenge the right of Israelis to live in peace and security. It does also support that right for Palestinians.

The boycott is NOT designed to single out individual Israelis, which the ASA statement makes very clear. There are no limits on the participation of any Israeli scholar

in ASA events unless s/he is specifically representing the government. (The ASA does not consider being funded by an Israeli university for attending a meeting or conference to be representing the government, and scholars who come to ASA conferences as individuals are welcome.)

Isn't the boycott movement extreme/fringe?

The ASA was founded in 1948 and is thus the oldest and most venerable professional association devoted to the study of US history and culture; the fact that its members have endorsed the boycott suggest that the movement is becoming mainstream.

Many world leaders and prominent academics support an academic and cultural boycott, including Angela Davis, Richard Falk, (Professor emeritus Princeton and United National Special Rapporteur on Palestinian Human Rights), Stephen Hawking, Gayatri Spivak, Desmond Tutu, and Alice Walker.

The ASA boycott is supported by a host of endowed chairs, former or current department chairs, and former Presidents of the ASA including Eric Cheyfitz (Ernest I. White Professor of American Studies and Humane Letters at Cornell University,) Inderpal Grewal Professor and Chair of Women's, Gender, and Sexuality Studies, Yale) Hazel Carby (Charles C & Dorathea S Dilley Professor of African American Studies & American Studies), Lizbeth Haas (Professor of History and former Chair of Feminist Studies, UC Santa Cruz), Amy Kaplan (former ASA President and Department Chair, Edward W. Kane Professor of English, University of Pennsylvania), Matthew Frye Jacobson (past ASA President and William Robertson Coe Professor of American Studies & History, Yale), Robin D.G. Kelley (Gary B. Nash Professor of History, UCLA), Paul Lauter (Allan K. and Gwendolyn Miles Smith Professor of English, Trinity College), David Palumbo Liu (Louise Hewlett Nixon Professor, and Professor of Comparative Literature, at Stanford University), David R. Roediger (Kendrick C. Babcock Professor of History, University of Illinois), John Carlos Rowe (USC Associates' Professor of the Humanities and Professor of English and American Studies and Ethnicity at the University of Southern California), and José David Saldívar (Professor of Comparative Literature and Director, Center for Comparative Studies in Race and Ethnicity).

US religious organizations have also embraced the related movement calling on organizations to divest from companies that support the occupation. Nine regional bodies of the United Methodists, representing thousands of churches nationwide, have divested from companies complicit in the occupation. While the Friends Fiduciary Committee, which handles investments for hundreds of Quaker institutions, divested from Caterpillar, Hewlett Packard and Veolia Environment.
(<http://www.endtheoccupation.org/article.php?id=3618>).

And as reported by the organization Jewish Voice for Peace, the pension fund TIAA CREF has divested its Social Choice Fund (<http://jewishvoiceforpeace.org/tiaa-cref>)

2. Won't this bring bad publicity to the University?

To date over 4,000 individuals and 150 organizations have signed a petition thanking the ASA National Council for endorsing an academic boycott. Since the membership vote, the ASA has been lauded by many people for taking an important ethical stand; the organization has also been strongly criticized by others who disagree with it. We recognize that there are different views of the matter, but members of the ASA voted in favor of the resolution—not because they thought it was uncontroversial, but because a majority of those who voted believed it was the right thing to do. Even for those who do not agree with this vote, the presence of ASA members will focus positive attention on campus by supporting our mission to [insert institution's relevant mission statement language e.g.--“make a positive contribution to human understanding”; “support diversity and equity”; “contribute to solving world problems”].

Also, while some media have reported possible attempts to litigate, deny funding to academics traveling to the ASA, or target American Studies programs, it is important to remember that boycott advocacy is covered by the First Amendment and that this is an institutional boycott by the ASA as an organization. Even though an institution may have members of the ASA on its faculty, this action by the ASA does not extend to its members' institutions.

3. Why endorse a boycott resolution now, when higher education is struggling to defend its existence to the public and maintain funding?

One potential difficulty higher education faces is the public perception that it is disconnected from or irrelevant to real world issues. The ASA resolution helps to counter such a view by demonstrating the significant role of academia in addressing pressing human problems.

The boycott can be thought of as part of a larger effort to redirect government spending away from the occupation and to higher education and other social goods. The U.S. gives Israel 3.1 billion in aid at a time when public funding for education is in decline, and the boycott helps raise important questions about our skewed spending priorities in which all universities have not only an ethical but also material stake.”

4. Why should the university pay for your ASA travel and membership expenses?

The ASA boycott is protected by the first amendment, and it would be wrong to punish ASA members by withholding routine funding because of it.
<http://palestinelegalsupport.org/2013/12/13/psls-advises-american-studies-association-that-boycott-is-protected-first-amendment-activity/>

The ASA is a good investment. For example, it sponsors a Distinguished Speakers Bureau that brings ASA ambassadors to campuses across the country to present cutting edge research in the field and engage in discussions of and work on curriculum and program building. With one of the most active student committees of any US professional organization, the ASA provides vital professionalization and mentorship for graduate students. Committees and Caucuses within the ASA also do important work. For example, the K-16 Collaboration Committee brings together university and K-12 educators and helps disseminate American Studies curriculum; the International Caucus brings U.S. and international scholars and students into discussion; and the Digital Humanities Caucus produces innovative knowledge regarding the educational possibilities of new media technology

The ASA supports innovative interdisciplinary research. One sign of this is the national and international reputation of the Association's journal, *American Quarterly*, which in the last 4 years has twice been given an award for "Best Special Issue" from the Council of Editors of Learned Journals. ASA members are prolific producers of innovative and award winning research and the organization and its annual meeting serve as an important forum for the exchange of ideas that faculty and students in turn bring back to their departments and campuses.