



1-29-2014

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Recommended Citation

Academic Extremism Threatens Democratic Values, Balt. Sun, Jan. 29, 2014

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Academic extremism threatens democratic values

[Commentary]

By **Kenneth Lasson**

JANUARY 29, 2014, 4:14 PM

Veritas vos liberabit, chanted the scholastics of yesteryear — "the truth will set you free." It's hard to see how that mantra could be echoed by latter-day counterparts in the academy. Consider the recent resolution by the American Studies Association that advocated an academic boycott of Israel. Its argument — that Israeli universities are complicit in state policies violating Palestinians' human rights — belies the truth: Israel has long been the most diverse, inclusive and tolerant of any Middle Eastern country.

The ASA's constitution declares that its purpose is "the encouragement of research, teaching, publication [and] the strengthening of relations among persons and institutions in this country and abroad ... about American culture in all its diversity and complexity." Would that the principle were genuine.

Although universities like to be perceived as protectors of reasoned discourse in a chaotic world — a community of scholars thirsting for knowledge in sylvan tranquillity — the real world of higher education is not quite so wonderful. Instead, much of the modern academy is dominated by deconstructionists who disdain "western" civilization, many of them pushing radical agendas. Instead of engaging in a bustling marketplace of ideas, students are often confronted by courses offering strictly one-sided points of view.

Nowadays, "Israel Apartheid Week," an annual anti-Zionist program that falsely and outrageously compares Israel to apartheid South Africa, is held every spring at many universities around the country. In truth, the academic boycotts that were employed in that country in the 1960s came largely at the behest of its own academics to protest the oppressive policies of a minority white government. There was never any attempt to cut off all South African scholars from international discourse with their peers.

The campaign to boycott Israeli academics began in 2002 in England and quickly spread in Europe. The primary goals were to inhibit Israeli scholars and scientists from obtaining grants or publishing learned articles; to persuade other institutions to sever relations with Israeli universities; to decline invitations to visit Israel and not to invite Israelis to international conferences; to deny recommendations to students

who wish to study in Israel; and to expel Jewish organizations from campus.

Meanwhile, various elite American universities — including Columbia, Georgetown, [UC Berkeley](#), Harvard, Yale and Princeton — were urged by radical faculty to divest themselves of stock holdings in companies doing business with Israel. Now comes the ASA resolution pushing for a scholarly boycott as well.

Besides skewing historical facts, the new anti-Zionist declaration bears ominous implications for the core principles of the educational enterprise in America, which finds itself struggling to remain one of the dwindling bastions of academic freedom. Not only are the principles of intellectual independence and the universality of science at stake but, ultimately, so are democratic values in a free society.

Fortunately, some major universities in Maryland, Virginia and the District of Columbia have issued statements condemning the proposed academic boycott. A few of them more directly refute the ASA resolution by substituting action for rhetoric. The [University of Baltimore School of Law](#), for example, co-sponsors the Haifa Summer Law Institute, which annually sends American law students to study in Israel and encourages student and faculty exchanges.

It is the obligation of all academics everywhere to recognize and challenge claims that have no basis in fact or logic. Instead of ignoring historical revisionism or common sense gone awry, they should respond vocally and forcefully. Not only can offensive speech and conduct be constitutionally confronted and condemned, but responsible administrators, faculty and students have a moral imperative to do so.

Meanwhile, we must continue to confront those seeking to draw a distinction between anti-Semitism and anti-Zionism.

As Martin Luther King famously wrote: "What is anti-Zionist? It is the denial to the Jewish people of a fundamental right that we justly claim for the people of Africa and freely accord all other nations of the globe. It is discrimination against the Jews ... because they are Jews. In short, it is anti-Semitism. The times have made it unpopular in the west to proclaim openly a hatred of the Jews. This being the case, the anti-Semite must constantly seek new form and forums for his poison. How he must revel in the new masquerade. He does not hate the Jews, he is just 'anti-Zionist!'"

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