

Former ASA Scholars: Israel Boycott Antithetical to Scholarly Pursuits

The decision by the 5,000-member American Studies Association (ASA) to boycott Israeli universities has drawn widespread condemnation. At a time when the humanities discipline as a whole is facing declining funding and student participation, some American Studies scholars say narrow pursuits such as boycotting Israel may distract from efforts to revamp the field and from values such as the free exchange of ideas that form the core of a liberal arts education.

“As a scholar, I deeply value the free exchange of ideas,” former American Studies Association president and Stanford University professor of English Dr. Shelley Fisher Fishkin told . “Academic boycotts make the free exchange of ideas impossible. For that reason, I think the ASA’s endorsement of the boycott was a big mistake.”

Fishkin, who served as ASA president from 2004-2005, was part of a group of eight former ASA presidents who sent an open letter to ASA members—66 percent of whom endorsed the boycott of Israel in a Dec. 15 vote—opposing the move on the grounds that it is “antithetical to the mission of free and open inquiry for which a scholarly organization stands.”

While Fishkin is personally opposed to many of the policies of the Israeli government, she draws the line at boycotts.

“I understand the impulse to do something to register a protest [against Israel’s policies], but I do not believe that boycotting Israeli universities is a sensible response,” she told .

Fishkin says the ASA’s boycott is counterproductive because it

targets some of Israel's most progressive institutions.

"Israeli universities are often at the forefront of fostering dialogue between Arabs and Jews, of educating the future leaders of Arab universities and of providing the next generation with the tools of critical thinking that can allow them to construct a society more equitable and just than that of their parents," she says.

Dr. Stephen J. Whitfield, an American Studies professor at Brandeis University who has taught in the field for more than 40 years, shares Fishkin's sentiments on the ASA's move.

"I'm outraged by this, and my sense is that the organization has become utterly foolish," Whitfield told .

Whitfield explains that he is not surprised by the ASA's actions against Israel. The professor says he quit the organization nearly 20 years ago because it had become highly politicized and that the recent boycott proves he was right.

The boycott is the result of the type of groupthink mentality that has permeated the ASA, he says.

"This is driven by a kind of groupthink and hostility to not only Israel, but to a broader assumption that conscience is inevitably on the side of those who claim to be oppressed," he says.

Whitfield adds that he believes the growth of ethnic studies within the American studies discipline may have also played a role in the ASA's hostility to Israel.

"What seems to be the case is the emergence of ethnic studies may have tilted the organization heavily in favor of people of color, in this case the Palestinians," he says.

Ethnic studies, which emerged from the civil rights movement of the 1960s and early '70s, places an emphasis on the study non-European culture in the U.S, such as African-American

studies or Native American studies.

But ethnic studies has also garnered considerable criticism, with some accusing it of “anti-Americanism”—former University of Colorado at Boulder ethnic studies professor Ward Churchill in 2005 blamed the 9/11 attacks on U.S. foreign policy.

The ASA’s focus on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, meanwhile, comes against the backdrop of a growing decline of interest in the humanities, as students and administrators are becoming less interested in the type of scholarship that is produced across that discipline today.

“In 2010, just 7 percent of college graduates nationally majored in the humanities, down from 14 percent in 1966,” the *Wall Street Journal* reports.

Much of this decline has been attributed to budget issues, rising tuition and student loan debt, and an overall lack of enthusiasm for the humanities by students, who flock to degrees in the STEM (science, technology, engineering and math) fields instead.

These problems are compounded by the fact that humanities majors are less likely to find jobs after they graduate. According to a report by the Georgetown Public Policy Institute, graduates who majored in English faced a 9.8 percent unemployment rate, and for history, religion and philosophy, majors it was 9.5 percent. By comparison, chemistry graduates only faced 5.6 percent unemployment.

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