

Enforcing Silence: Academic Freedom, Palestine and the Criticism of Israel, edited by David Landy, Ronit Lentin and Connor McCarthy, London: Zed Books, 2020. 288 pages. \$95 cloth; \$29.95 paper.

Reviewed by Clement M. Henry

This stimulating set of essays about academic freedom stems from a conference of pro-Palestinian academics and activists based across the English-speaking world from Australia and the United States to the United Kingdom and Ireland, and also in Lebanon and the Netherlands. Originally titled “Freedom of Speech and Higher Education: The Case of the Academic Boycott of Israel,” the conference was held in September 2017 at Trinity College Dublin, Ireland. Ireland, given its colonial settler history, may offer more hospitable ground for protests against the Israeli occupation of Palestine than the other Anglo colonial settler states represented in this book. The organizers point out that academic freedom was written into Irish law in the 1997 Universities Act. Another conference, “International Law and the State of Israel,” was relocated from the U.K. to University College Cork, Ireland, after Southampton University canceled it on alleged security grounds. Even so, the Irish university authorities were pressured by supporters of Israel into refusing to sponsor it as an academic event. In Dublin, however, the university provost upheld the present discussions of academic freedom against the usual protests of Israel supporters.

In their well-crafted introduction the editors examine definitions of academic freedom. “Academic freedom is generally held to cover institutional self-governance (including hiring and discipline), and to cover what is taught, how it is taught, what is researched and how, and how that research is written about” (page 7). Is the Boycott Divestment and Sanctions (BDS) movement really an infringement of the academic freedom of Israeli scholars? The editors draw a distinction between the negative “freedoms from” outside interference in one’s work and professional achievement and the positive “freedoms to” enjoy international recognition, cooperation, research grants, and the like. One’s freedom should not be exercised at the expense of another’s. They argue that any losses of positive freedoms of Israelis to engage with foreigners affected by BDS are far outweighed by the negative hindrances to academic freedom suffered by the silenced advocates of BDS.

Academic freedom is necessarily rooted in institutional structures of higher education. The essays in this book analyze the university frameworks in which academic freedom is exercised and the cultural biases of the states in which they

operate. Academia across the English speaking world seems weighted to favor the abuse of academic freedom by supporters of Israel. Not only are universities responsive to big donations, even creating “Israel Studies” programs as well as exercising heavy-handed influence over other colleges and departments. They also exercise disciplinary authority and insist on “balance” that may be unfair in the context of the Palestine-Israel conflict: “the realities of occupation and racism needing constantly to be balanced by denials that such realities actually exist” (p. 21). Their cultural biases in favor of the good old colonial days also deserve serious review in all the colonial settler states represented here as well as the U.K. and Israel, not to mention Ariel University, an illegal institution founded on occupied territory.

Even Ireland deserved a critical chapter about its exercises of academic freedom, but the most interesting chapter, subtitled “legal liminality in neoliberal times,” concerns the American University of Beirut, an American institution registered and academically certified in New York State yet placed in Lebanon, a country that does not recognize Israel. Tala Mahhoul, the only activist included in this book who does not also hold a postgraduate degree or university position, is a recent graduate of AUB. She recognizes that AUB’s two jurisdictions are contradictory but criticizes the university administration for invoking academic freedom as the pretext for stopping student protests against invitations to foreign scholars having connections with Israel, rather than simply explaining AUB’s legal dilemma to the students. She objects to the administration’s use of “academic freedom” to vilify BDS supporters.

Some defenders of academic freedom have used “civility” as a weapon against advocates for a free Palestine. For instance Steven Salaita, a prolific, tenured scholar, lost the job offered him by the University of Illinois Champagne Urbana because of his “disrespectful words,” tweeting after one of Israel’s particularly destructive bombardments of Gaza that Netanyahu’s “wearing ‘a neckless made from the teeth of Palestinian children’ would surprise nobody” (p. 316). Two of the contributors, C. Heike Schotten and Arianne Shahvisi, unpack the uses of civility as a weapon arming colonial civilizing missions and wars against barbarian terrorists. They go so far as to dismiss academic freedom as a useless defense for pro-Palestinian scholars. Others, notably Jeff Handmaker, argue for mobilizing international law to defend academic freedom against its abuse by supporters of Israel.

Rabab Ibrahim Abdulhadi, a tenured professor at San Francisco State University, detailed her protracted struggles with university administrators in this book’s

preface. She was the target of a “Lawfare project” initiated by a pro-Israel community in California . “Lawfare” attempts to conflate any criticism of Israel with anti-Semitism, but she succeeded in having charges of anti-Semitism dismissed by a federal judge in October 2018. Shortly after this volume went to press, however, President Trump issued an Executive Order, “Combating Anti-Semitism,” that also stretches the concept to include criticism of Israel. Federal funding may then help silence discordant elements in Middle East Studies programs.

This collection of essays deserves the attention of political theorists and civil liberties lawyers as well as Middle East area experts. Its arguments may also be of interest to a wider public in the wake of America’s long hot summer of protests that Black Lives Matter. Readers may be more open to the idea that academic freedom is constrained by universities rooted in colonial settler states. As Alexis de Tocqueville once observed, American democracy excluded both native inhabitants and imported slaves. This book calls for greater inclusion and a rebalancing of the clash of academic freedoms.

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