

British Academics Betray Israel

“Our age” wrote Julien Benda in 1927 in *La Trahison des clercs* “is indeed the age of the intellectual organization of political hatreds.” The newest example of this organized hatred is the Conference to be held in the UK between April 17 and 19, 2015 under the auspices of the Southampton Law School. The given title is “International Law and the State of Israel: Legitimacy, Responsibility, and Exceptionalism.”

The title betrays the underlying animosity behind the conference: the existence of Israel, now in its 66th year, is something to be discussed and, for many of the participants, ended. The conference is intellectually limited in two senses. No other country’s right of existence is being questioned, or denied, not even Syria, Libya, or Iran.

Moreover, little genuine discussion of complex issues pertaining to the Arab-Israeli conflict can be expected. Some of the participants in this “academic” conference have made previous public statements that have gone beyond what might be considered the limits of reasonable argument.

Political correctness and multiculturalism are the mantra of our time. But this radical chic emphasis on diversity and ethnic character has been accompanied by intellectual betrayal, especially in universities and colleges, of liberal rational expression of universal values. Political correctness has in recent years become an attack on culture. Particularly unfortunate in this respect has been the influence of the distinguished French anthropologist Claude Levi-Strauss, who suggested the need to “fight against ranking cultural differences hierarchically.” As the French philosopher Alain Finkielkraut wrote, the attack on culture is being perpetrated by a new class of barbarians, the self-made barbarians of the intelligentsia. Some are to be found in British and American

universities.

This, unfortunately, has led to arbitrary criteria of taste, or reluctance to accept intrinsic merit. Universities, however, should counter with the view that a common humanity transcends ethnic, racial, and sexual differences. History, including that of the founding of the Jewish State, is not a myth as is the Palestinian Narrative of Victimhood, nor is truth an ideological construct.

It is taken for granted that the purpose of academic conferences is not simply to foster free speech but also to have a free discussion and open discussion of different points of view on an issue. The UK Education Act (No. 2) Act 1986 states that authorities in universities, polytechnics, and colleges, "shall take such steps as are reasonably practical to ensure that freedom of speech within the law is secured for members, student, and employees."

Even more relevant to the present issue is the UK Governmental Protocol on freedom of expression that outlines the framework within which members of universities enjoy the right to expression of expression. This entails promoting and positively encouraging free debate, enquiry, and indeed protest. It means tolerating a wide range of views, political as well as academic, even when they are unpopular, controversial, or provocative.

The stated themes of the UK Southampton Conference are admirable in theory. The conference, it is said, will link legal, ethical, political, historical issues that follow from the themes of the conference. It purports to stimulate reflections on the scholarship between international law and issues such as identity and injustice, violence and morality, self-determination and legitimacy.

But the stated objectives make clear the hypocrisy involved in this whole enterprise. It is one thing to state that the

motivation of the conference is to examine the role international law can play in political struggles. It is quite another to state that the first objective is to generate a multidisciplinary platform for scholarly debate about the relationship between injustices and ongoing violence in Historic Palestine.

The conference states that it intends to go beyond issues such as the Israeli occupation of the Palestinian territories of the West Bank, East Jerusalem, and Gaza, and what it calls the "illegality of Israel's settlements and apartheid colonization in these territories." Rather, it will deal with the creation and the nature of the Jewish state and the status of Jerusalem.

The aim of the conference is to shift public debate from focusing on the legality of Israel's actions to the manner in which the State of Israel was created as a result of injustice and violence in "Historic Palestine." The conference is supposed to explore the suffering and injustice done to Palestinians by the foundation of Israel.

The real objective of the conference is to educate young Palestinian lawyers and legal and political scholars on the use of international law to expand legal argument beyond "the 1967 Occupation discourse." Put simply, the conference implicitly aims to challenge the existence and legitimacy of the State of Israel.

About the planned conference two things can be said. The program indicates that it is totally biased and tendentious, comprising an intellectual assault on the existence of Israel, and a call for Palestinians to become more active in using international law and other methods to bring about the extinction of Israel. Secondly, the participants are essentially of one mind and collectively give intellectual cover to attempts and proposals to delegitimize Israel.

It would be contrary to the whole concept of free speech to call for the cancellation of the conference or to seek an injunction to forbid it. Nevertheless, every effort should be made by academics in the UK, the U.S., and elsewhere to shame and expose the conference for what it is: in reality a kind of intellectual and hateful part of the political campaign in the war against Israel. It is not an academic exercise seeking the truth, but a cover for a one-sided indictment of Israel.

In this respect two things might be done. One is a counter-conference in dealing fairly and accurately with people holding diverse views to discuss the history and interactions between Jews and Arabs in the Middle East. A coherent analysis of the Palestinian Narrative of Victimhood might be an important part of this.

A second is giving publicity to the oxygen of this bias and intellectual travesty. Negative publicity may have an impact on shaming, perhaps those not talking part in this particular conference, but in persuading other like-minded individuals to avoid any future shameful behavior. It should make clear that the Southampton conference is a violation of the whole concept of real principles of free speech. Looking at the list of participants it is clear that no range of opinions will be expressed. They all share a critical view of the state and actions of Israel that is held responsible for the problems in the Middle East.

The sponsor of the conference, Professor Oren Ben-Dor of the Southampton Law School, makes no secret of his position in his view of "the arrogant and self-righteous Zionist entity." He sees Israeli Apartheid as the core of the crisis, and the solution as a single state over all "Historic Palestine." Not surprisingly, he calls for a boycott of Israel. So do most of the other participants who also favor a one-state solution or the end of the Jewish state.

The University of Southampton prides itself on its combination

of academic excellence with an innovative and entrepreneurial approach to research. It can take no pride in the shameful intellectually limited conference to be held on its premises.

Fist published in the