

# On the Wrong Side of History

## *Boycotting Historians Denounce Blacklists Just as They Call for Blacklisting Israeli Academics*

By Richard L. Cravatts, PhD



American Historical Association founders

Of the many examples of the shameful degradation of values in academia, few are more intellectually grotesque than academic boycotts, which, in their present form, are almost exclusively targeted at Israeli scholars and institutions. In the latest example, at their January annual meeting the American Historical Association (AHA) debated among their members two petitions: the first, which was ultimately rejected by the AHA's Council, urged the AHA to review investigate "credible charges of violations of academic freedom in Israel and the occupied Palestinian territories," whether by "constituting a fact-finding committee, authorizing a delegation or issuing an investigative report."

The second petition recommended that the AHA issue a statement, which it did, affirming "the rights of students, faculty and other historians to speak freely and to engage in nonviolent political action expressing diverse perspectives on historical or contemporary issues." Putting aside the absurdly paranoid notion that any anti-Israel activism is suppressed or otherwise limited on campuses anywhere, what actually terrified these intellectual hypocrites, it seemed, was the possibility that, once they had publicly announced their enmity for Israel, Zionism, and Jewish affirmation, they would be held accountable for their toxic views, that they would be named for what they are: anti-Israel activists whose rabid ideology can, and should, be made transparent, exposed, and understood.

The AHA statement made this hypocrisy clear when it meretriciously stated that, "We condemn all efforts to intimidate those expressing their views. Specifically, we condemn in the strongest terms the creation, maintenance and dissemination of blacklists and watch lists –through media (social and otherwise)–which identify specific individuals in ways that could lead to harassment and intimidation."

The so-called "blacklists" and "watch lists" referenced in the statement are such databases as Canary Mission (mentioned specifically), Discover the Networks, Campus Watch, the AMCHA Initiative, and other similar organizations, all of which have as their intention to provide students, faculty, and others with information on the ideology, scholarship, speeches, and writing of radical professors and students. These are individuals (and groups) who have very public records of pro-Palestinian, anti-Israel activism and whose words and behavior have been catalogued so that the politicization of scholarship can be exposed and students can avoid courses taught by professors with a predetermined and evident bias against Israel.

The craven AHA members are not the first representatives of the professoriate to recoil in terror at the thought of being included in one of these databases, even though they are perfectly willing, if not eager, to signal their virtue in the first place by publicly expressing their obsessive disdain for the Jewish state. In 2014, for instance, 40 professors of Jewish studies published a denunciation of a study that named professors who had been identified as expressing "anti-Israel bias, or possibly even antisemitic [sic] rhetoric."

While the 40 academic "heavyweights" claimed they, of course, rejected anti-Semitism totally as part of teaching, they were equally repelled by the tactics and possible negative effects of the report, produced by the AMCHA Initiative, a comprehensive review of the attitudes about Israel of some 200 professors who signed an online petition during the last Gaza

incursion that called for an academic boycott against Israeli scholars—academics the petitioners claimed were complicit in the “latest humanitarian catastrophe caused by Israel’s . . . military assault on the Gaza Strip,” just as the AHA members alleged that because Palestinians were being denied access to education as a result of Israeli policy, Israeli academics deserved to be collectively shunned.

Calling “the actions of AMCHA deplorable,” the indignant professors were insulted by the organization’s “technique of monitoring lectures, symposia and conferences,” something which, they believed, “strains the basic principle of academic freedom on which the American university is built.” That was a rather breathtaking assertion by academics, just as it was when the AHA members repeated the same idea; namely, that it is contrary to the core mission of higher education that ideas publicly expressed by professors should be examined and judged, and that by even applying some standards of objectivity on a body of teaching by a particular professor “AMCHA’s approach closes off all but the most narrow intellectual directions.”

Specifically, reports like the AMCHA product clearly indicate which professors have demonstrated that they bring to their teaching a clear bias against the Jewish state; in fact, they have gone even further with that enmity by mobilizing as part of the global boycott, divestment, and sanctions (BDS) movement to turn Israeli academics in intellectual pariahs by excluding them from the intellectual marketplace of ideas.

Can anyone believe that had the AMCHA Initiative or other organizations issued a report that revealed the existence of endemic racism, or homophobia, or sexism, or Islamophobia in university coursework, and had warned students who might be negatively impacted to steer clear of courses taught by those offending professors, that these same 40 feckless professors or the AHA’s historians would have denounced such reports being “McCarthyesque” or somehow undermining the civility of

higher education by actually holding academics responsible for some of the intellectually deficient or corrupt ideologies to which they adhere and which they are more than happy to foist on others—including, of course, their students.

Why should a professor's political attitudes *not* be known to students, especially, as in these cases, when those anti-Israel attitudes are extremely germane to their area of teaching, namely Middle East studies and history? None of the mentioned organizations furtively investigated the private lives of the 200 professors, or historians, or campus radicals, nor did they hack into emails accounts, or take testimony from anonymous sources, or delve through association memberships, reading habits, or private writings without the individuals' knowledge or consent. They were not spied upon nor their courses videotaped furtively by students.

The findings were based on the public utterances, published works, and social media posts of professors and students, behavior and speech they apparently had no problem with making public and for which they were not hesitant, at least initially, to take responsibility. In fact, as often happens when anti-Israel academics are called upon to defend their libels and intellectual assaults against the Jewish state, they wish to freely pontificate on the many perceived defects of Israel but do not like to be inconvenienced by being challenged on those often biased, and intellectually dishonest, views by others with opposing viewpoints.

More hypocritically, these morally self-righteous historians denounced their placement on so-called blacklists but wished to do the very same thing to Israeli scholars by proposing to essentially blacklist an entire nation's professoriate for the actions of that country's government—over which, of course, academics, even if they actually agree with those policies, have little or no influence. And the extent of their blacklist is more onerous and less intellectually honest, since they are blacklisting an entire group of academics, irrespective of

ideology, without any distinction between those who might share their views and those who hold views that are ideologically opposed to theirs. In its indiscriminate nature, an academic boycott is morally perverse, since, unlike the efforts of Campus Watch, the AMCHA Initiative, Discover the Networks, or Canary Mission (which deal with specific individuals and their publicly professed and articulated beliefs), an academic boycott against a whole nation of scholars is so random and untargeted that it has to be more about anti-Jewish bigotry than a sincere effort to effect productive change and move the Israelis and Palestinians towards peace.

There is no surprise that an academic association like the AHA would call for a boycott against only one country—Israel—precisely because a large number of its ranks are evidently steeped in a world view defined by post-colonial, anti-American, anti-Israel thinking, and dedicated to the elevation of identity politics and a cult of victimhood. That they profess to hold high-minded, well-intentioned motives, and speak with such rectitude, does not excuse the fact that their efforts are in the end a betrayal of what the study of history and the university have, and should, stand for—the free exchange of ideas, even ones bad, without political or ideological litmus tests.

“People we used to think of as harmless drudges pursuing mouldy futilities,” observed the wry Edward Alexander, professor emeritus at the University of Washington, in speaking about a professoriate that has lost its intellectual compass, “are now revealing to us the explosive power of boredom, a power that may well frighten us.”

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