Reading Edward Said in South Africa-The Slippery Side of the Academy: From Ivory Tower to Market Mill

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Abstract:

This presentation examines solidarity actions by students and staff in the academy during the anti-apartheid struggle in South Africa with solidarity action in support of the calls made by Palestinian civil society today. The presentation will show how the impact of corporate globalization works to erode notions of solidarity. It will argue that the latter is best served by a defense of higher education as a public good and an autonomous sphere of critical and productive democratic citizenry as well as resistance to the imposition of commercial values to subvert the purpose and mission of our institutions. It concedes that the academy has to be accountable not only to the collegiums but also to the constituencies 'outside'. It attempts to identify these constituencies and suggests that they together with progressive academics and students can influence the university.

The presentation calls for a self-critical look at the practices of management and some academics by employing Edward Said's notion of the public intellectual. It will also highlight crucial initiatives by colleagues in some universities that point the way toward transforming the academy for the common good and who strive through their praxis to contribute to genuine social transformation and solidarity.

Almost six years ago the world lost one of its most erudite and passionate intellectuals. For most of his life, Edward Said, relentlessly focused his prodigious intellect in support of oppressed people in Palestine and beyond. Although Said is no longer with us physically, his writings remain a fount of wisdom for those academics who believe, despite the corporatized debasement of higher education which casts public space as a commodified sphere, that intellectual work must recover its connections with political realities. These include issues of solidarity and our responsibility as academics to being citizens in the broader world beyond the confines of the academy.

Jon Nixon, in his essay, 'Towards a hermeneutics of hope: The legacy of Edward Said' (1) notes how a contemporaneous rethinking of the principles offered by Said is vital, given the policy and market pressures on the democratic knowledge production and dissemination functions of the university. In my presentation I take up this challenge by retrospectively analyzing the anti-apartheid movements call to isolate the South African apartheid regime including through the academic boycott compared to the present Palestinian call for the boycott of Israeli academic institutions. I also argue that this endeavour is naturally linked to attempts at transforming the academy where such mobilization exists to be more responsive to issues of social justice, solidarity, epistemological concerns such as whose knowledge is privileged whether endogenous to the institutions we find ourselves in or the world 'out there'.

A consistent theme and a preoccupation of Said concerned what it means to be an intellectual and the role of the public intellectual. In both he's seminal books *Orientalism* and *Culture and Imperialism*, Said exposes the political consequences of studies masquerading as conforming to the canons of academic 'neutrality' and the "pernicious corruption of academic activity that is not aligned with the victims of injustice"(2).Said grappled with ways in which it might be possible for intellectuals to promote the causes of democracy and social justice without being co-opted within the structures of power and identity politics on the one hand and disciplinary rigidities and organizational hierarchies on the other. He was convinced that intellectuals can make a difference in challenging injustices and opening up transformative possibilities. For Said, crucially, the power of resistance is situated in the ability of the intellectual to "write back" to imperial power. He borrowed and adapted a musical term 'contrapunctual' to denote the counterpoint to imperial hegemony and oppression. This presentation is concerned with this contrapunctual praxis. That is, the works that colonized people themselves-in this instance the previously oppressed South African black intellectuals under the erstwhile apartheid system and Palestinian intellectuals today-produce in response to colonial domination.

There were moments in modern history when particular struggles galvanized millions around the world, including academics and intellectuals, to act in solidarity with oppressed people elsewhere. This occurred for instance during the Spanish Civil War, the struggle of the Vietnamese against French and US imperialism and in support of the liberation struggles in Southern Africa. Today, after one outrage after another, daily injustices piled upon massacres and atrocities, support for Palestinian human rights has become the emblematic solidarity movement of our time and places in sharp relief the response globally, of academics and intellectuals today. Said quote

The South African example of academic boycott forms an interesting point of comparison not least because there are relevant similarities between apartheid South Africa and Israel as pointed out by numerous South African personalities who visited and are familiar with the situation of Palestinians. These include Archbishop Desmond Tutu, the respected jurist John Dugard and the scholarly research of South Africa's Human Sciences Research Council (3).

The university in South Africa played a critical role in reproducing the structural inequalities and injustices that were found in that society. Universities in South Africa—including the "liberal" ones—were closely linked to the state: they received much of their funding from the state; they provided the

"scientific," commercial, and intellectual bases for the state to continue functioning; and they were the prime knowledge producers for the state and its bureaucracy. Moreover, a large number of academics were directly linked to the state, furthered the apartheid agenda at universities, conducted research on specific issues as the state required, and even spied on other academics and students. It was such research that provided the "Christian" theological justification for racism. It also provided some of the basis for the security forces' military operations against neighboring countries and liberation movements. But of course, there was resistance to this, and the university was, as we called it, an important "site of struggle."

The Israeli university is not that much different from what the South African one was. Israeli universities and a number of individual Israeli academics play key roles in providing the intellectual support for the Israeli state and its endeavours. Certain Israeli universities have very strong links to the military establishment, particularly through their provision of postgraduate degrees to the military. A number of Israeli academics provide the practical and ideological support necessary for the maintenance of the occupation and even for the ethnic cleansing of Palestinians, extrajudicial killings, racial segregation, and land expropriation. Consider the homicidal rant of one Arnon Soffer, who has spent years advising the Israeli government on the "demographic threat" posed by the Arabs: "When 2.5 million people live in a closed-off Gaza, it's going to be a human catastrophe. Those people will become even bigger animals than they are today. . . . So, if we want to remain alive, we will have to kill and kill and kill. All day, every day." (4)

In the main, Israeli institutions of higher learning, according to the testimonies of a number of Israeli academics, certainly are not consistent with the principle that "[i]nstitutions of higher education are conducted for the common good . . . [which] depends on the free search for truth and its free exposition."(5) The "common good"—whether "common" includes only Israelis or both Israelis and Palestinians—is not served when universities and individual academics support racism, ethnic cleansing, and the continued violation of international law. Can we ask colleges and universities to be "institutions committed to the search for truth and its free expression" when they willingly support a state and military complex that promotes discrimination among their student bodies and when they have no regard for their fellow academics (Palestinian and dissenting Israeli academics) whose academic freedom is trampled and denied at every turn by the patrons of these colleges and universities? Avraham Oz, in his comments on a May 2005 conference titled "The Demographic Problem and the Demographic Policy of Israel," held at the University of Haifa, points out that it was not just an individual academic that lent "credibility to this conference which promoted ethnic cleansing"; the guest of honor was the rector of the university, Yossi Ben-Artzi. (6)When the South African liberation movements called for academic boycotts against South African institutions and academics, the institutions that were targeted included the academic bastions of apartheid (such as the University of Stellenbosch and the University of Potchestroom), the liberal white universities (such as the University of the Witwatersrand and the University of Cape Town), as well as the black ghetto universities (such as the University of Durban-Westville and the University of the Western Cape). The "victims" in this case included white and black academics, liberals and racists, those who supported apartheid and those who supported the anti-apartheid struggle. Further, the assertion that an academic boycott against Israeli institutions will compromise academic freedom needs, of necessity, to be followed by the questions: Whose academic freedom? and Who benefits from this "academic freedom"?

In the South African context, we understood that sanctions and boycotts were targeted against the state and various institutions within broader South African society—businesses, institutions of higher learning, sporting institutions, and so on—so that black people, primarily, might be liberated from the shackles, injustices, and humiliations we faced. It is true, as Ronnie Kasrils, the ex South African minister of intelligence, argued, that ultimately it was both black and white South Africans who were liberated. However, the international community recognized and acknowledged the oppression of black people and the need for their liberation.

In the Israeli-Palestinian context, we should be asking whose academic freedom and whose human rights it is that we want to protect. It is Palestinians who are living under occupation. It is Palestinians within Israel who are being discriminated against on the basis of their ethnicity. Ultimately, as Kasrils and Victoria Brittain argued in the Guardian, both Palestinians and Israelis will be liberated. (7)

If we are to ask "whose academic freedom," then we are forced to consider what academic freedom actually exists for Palestinians. Is the academic freedom of a professor in Birzeit University equal to that of a professor at Haifa University, when the former is under occupation by a government that is supported by the latter? Palestinian academics daily run a gauntlet of soldiers, checkpoints, roadblocks, and the threat of arrest, detention, and death in order to be able to get to their institutions to perform basic tasks like teaching and researching. They often teach classes that are sparsely populated, usually because students could not get through the checkpoints. Students sometimes are trapped in their universities for days, unable to get home because of curfews and checkpoints.

And the basic rights of academics, as explained by the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), do not exist for Palestinian academics in the occupied Palestinian territories.(8) UNESCO requires that higher-education teaching personnel "should be enabled throughout their careers to participate in international gatherings on higher education research, [and] to travel abroad without political restrictions." For most Palestinian academics from the occupied territories, such opportunities are based on a range of factors that are out of their control and firmly in the control of the occupation authorities: whether they will be allowed to pass through checkpoints on their way to the border or airport, whether they will be allowed to leave the country, whether they will be required to hand over their papers to the occupation authorities for vetting before they are allowed to leave, whether they will be monitored at foreign institutions or conferences they might be traveling to, and whether they will be interrogated on their return about the content of their presentations.

UNESCO further requires that academics should be "entitled to the maintaining of academic freedom, that is to say, the right, without constriction by prescribed doctrine, to freedom of teaching and discussion, [and] freedom in carrying out research and disseminating and publishing the results thereof." As discussed earlier, the freedom of Palestinian professors to teach is contingent on a number of factors related to the occupation. Their ability to conduct research is similarly contingent. There is not much freedom to do research or to disseminate research for an academic who is confined, for months at a time, in a canton of a few square miles and whose virtually every move is dictated by military occupation authorities. Oren Ben-Dor, on the basis of this understanding of academic freedom, believes that an academic boycott "is a boycott intended to produce academic freedom."(9)

In the struggle against the apartheid state, conceptions about any arena of social practice were inextricable from wider conceptions of social justice and encompassed not only political freedom. These wider considerations constituted the framework on which both ethical and strategic judgments were made and practical choices decided. This was true in relation to the isolation of South Africa from the international sporting arena, in relation to the divestment campaign, in relation to the resolutions of the United Nations relative to apartheid, and, indeed, in relation to the issue of academic boycotts.

In each of these, the primary consideration was the pursuit of a set of actions that would bring censure and condemnation of the violence of the apartheid regime through international cooperation in support of the resistance struggles waged internally by the people of South Africa. These practices recognized not only the indivisibility of civil, political, and economic freedoms but also the interrelatedness (through the divestment campaign) of the violence of apartheid and the very forms of exploitation on which the whole of apartheid's political edifice was constructed. Political, social, and economic issues were regarded as

inseparable and were seen as mutually foundational to the idea of resistance and the practices—boycotts included—it shaped.

The academic boycott was never regarded as a privileged strategy, nor were academics regarded as an exceptional category. The reasons for this were simple. First, the strategies adopted by the liberation struggle placed onerous conditions on millions of individuals and many institutions in society, some more than others. Particularly for workers and the poor, the sacrifices they were asked to make exceeded those of other social classes, and in some cases it meant not only the loss of jobs, family, and health but also direct physical confrontation with a brutish state. Second, academic boycotts were supported by the majority of those academics who understood their role to be engaged and socially committed intellectuals. Academics so engaged did not regard themselves as privileged when it came to making sacrifices, even though their sacrifices were, relative to those of others, less onerous and demanding. Third, we simply did not regard intellectual work as outside of accountability. Finally, the call for an academic boycott was considered a legitimate and necessary extension of the freedom struggle into other arenas of social and political engagement and practice.

The "objective test" by which the issue of an academic boycott, or any other such strategy, must be evaluated can only arise from a consideration of the conditions of each case. That is, it is determined contextually, not a priori or ahistorically. Academic freedom in the conditions of civil war, violent occupation, genocide, or conquest and subjugation must surely bear some reference to these very conditions for the criteria of its determination. Failure to recognize this will mean that the very concept of freedom more generally, and academic freedom in particular, becomes both meaningless and bereft of any practical possibilities.

A colleague in hindsight asks a critical question about the academic boycott against South Africa: "Was the boycott successful in South Africa?" And responds:

> Of course, there were some costs. Gatekeepers did emerge (but as frequently as not were challenged); some academics who actively opposed apartheid had invitations to international conferences withdrawn; it was not always possible to target the supporters of the apartheid regime; and South African academics' understanding of global issues was certainly weakened. It is in the nature of such weapons that they are double-edged. But, as part of a battery of sanctions, the academic boycott undoubtedly had an impact on both the apartheid state and on white academics and university administrations. The boycott, together with the more successful sports boycott and economic divestment campaigns, helped to strengthen the struggle of black people for justice. The Afrikaner elite, very proud of its European roots and of the legacy of Jan Smuts as a global representative in the postwar system, and convinced that there would be support for its policies abroad, was rudely shaken. University administrations could no longer hide behind an excuse of neutrality but had to issue statements on their opposition to apartheid and introduce programs of redress. Academic associations (some more than others) examined the nature and conditions of research in their disciplines, and faculty unions became part of broader struggles for justice rather than bodies protecting narrow professional interests. Universities became sites of intense debate, and, indeed, intellectuals became critically involved in debates about the nature of current and future South African societies. In the wake of the boycott, there was not a curtailing of academic freedom, then, but a flourishing of intellectual thought that was rich, varied, and exciting.

Finally, a respected South African academic, Jacklyn Cock, shared this sentiment with me: "[The academic boycott] definitely had an impact on white academics. . . . [Y]ou could quote Raymond Hoffenberg, senior lecturer in medicine at the University of Cape Town before he was banned, who told

me that the boycott ‘made many white medical academics rethink the scientific and intellectual cost of apartheid.’ I think opposition to academic boycotts tends to privilege the university as an ivory tower that is divorced from its social context, and in the South African case, the notion of isolating the regime was a very significant nonviolent action.”11

Today sixteen years after the first democratic elections difficult questions are being posed about our trajectory of development. Struggles continue and there are continuities and discontinuities, antinomies and ambiguities in policy and practice and considerable contestation. Higher education in South Africa has not escaped, under the behest of corporate globalization, the impact of marketisation on the academy. In this situation, neo-liberal policies and the seduction of money often trump solidarity. The possibilities and extent of the academy and intellectuals in South Africa to live up to Edward Said’s imperative of “taking a principled stand” will be shaped not only by the nature and changes in the political economy but just as importantly by the character of human agency inside and outside the academy. Presently, a vital debate amongst South African academics concerns links between Ben Gurion University and the University of Johannesburg. Two hundred and fifty key South African academics and intellectuals have called on the University of Johannesburg to sever links with Ben Gurion University as part of the global BDS campaign initiated by Palestinian civil society. (see www.ujpetition.com). While this specific campaign continues it behooves us in South Africa as elsewhere, to cultivate, following Said: remembrance of our unjust and traumatic past ; critique of the inequalities and injustices that blight our present; consciousness that nothing is gained without creativity, audacity and struggle and imagination to conceive of new ways of acting-and in this case from the lessons of our apartheid experience in South Africa and the creativity of Palestinian steadfastness and resistance and finally by applying the most potent weapon we have learnt to rely on, forged and steeled in numerous struggles of workers and oppressed through time and space-Solidarity, which in the words of the late Samora Machel, “…is not an act of charity but an act of unity between allies fighting on different terrains towards the same objectives”.

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