



PEDAGOGICAL PERSPECTIVE

## Arguing BDS in the Undergraduate Seminar

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Why teach Boycott, Divestment, Sanction (BDS) today? Founded by Palestinian NGOs in 2005, BDS aims through peaceful means to pressure Israel to comply with international law and end the occupation of Palestinian land.<sup>1</sup> Arguably, no issue has roiled Middle East studies as much in recent years. The call to support BDS continues to face charges of antisemitism as well as challenges to its claims to be both Palestinian-led and a “movement” (although I will call it one here). In some cases, support for BDS has also jeopardized academic careers.<sup>2</sup>

Then, too, there is the question of BDS’s efficacy and relevance. Both defenders and supporters acknowledge that the effort to mobilize international pressure on Israel suffered a heavy blow with the 2020 “Abraham Accords,” the Trump administration’s ungainly deal to “normalize” relations between several Arab states and Israel.<sup>3</sup> The impact of this attempted realignment remains unclear, but few dispute it has weakened BDS and further marginalized Palestinians.

Given this background, can a course centered on BDS now seem anything other than indulgent? *Who cares* if BDS is right or wrong if many believe it hasn’t a chance?

In 2019 I developed and taught a new, BDS-centered undergraduate political science seminar. Subsequent events may call into question whether this upper-level elective class should continue to be offered. I believed then that, while teaching about BDS is intellectually, ethically, and even professionally fraught, so is ignoring it because BDS shapes political behavior. Indeed, since that time the Biden campaign’s 2020 promise to defeat BDS has only echoed Trump-era

<sup>1</sup> The BDS webpage is <https://bdsmovement.net/>. Accessed April 20, 2021.

<sup>2</sup> “Deploring” intimidation directed towards scholars and organizations, in 2015 MESA issued a statement affirming the protection of free speech. <https://mesana.org/about/resolutions>. Accessed April 3, 2020.

<sup>3</sup> Jeffrey Goldberg, “Iran and the Palestinians Lose Out in the Abraham Accords.” *The Atlantic*. September 16, 2020. <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2020/09/winners-losers/616364/>. Accessed April 21, 2021.

actions and rhetoric.<sup>4</sup> In this way – at a minimum – BDS still matters, and social scientists should make no apologies teaching about movements that matter.

But the objective here is not to evaluate the political efficacy or even the virtue of BDS, which I uphold. Rather, this essay argues that BDS should be studied for its extraordinary pedagogical value. Discussed below are five reasons why I will continue teaching undergraduates about BDS. I also list readings and materials that proved useful in the seminar's first iteration.

### **BDS opens a portal to the ethics of dissent in the era of Black Lives Matter.**

Our 2019 seminar ended before the killing of George Floyd by Minneapolis police officers. Some students joined in the extensive 2020 protests that followed Floyd's death – for many, their first such experience. Campus interest in justice and the politics of dissent remains extraordinarily high.

A seminar on BDS therefore suits the university *zeitgeist*. Our seminar began with readings on dissent that laid a limited but functional cornerstone for later discussions about BDS. Barbara Falk presents useful definitions and discussions of violence/non-violence and the appropriate targets of dissent.<sup>5</sup> Cass Sunstein's accessible book explicates the effects of seeing the dissenting behavior of others (noting these effects also brought to the fore how my public support for BDS might affect students' views).<sup>6</sup> Thoreau's classic essay on the morality/obligation of dissent, matters of conscience versus "undue respect for law," and skepticism of voting as a mechanism for justice, elicited a strong response among students.<sup>7</sup> While hardly comprehensive, these works allowed us to begin to struggle with two difficult but important questions: When is dissent the *right* thing to do? When is it the *smart* thing to do?

Students also considered political sociologist Barrington Moore's emphatic reminder that the absence of change requires action, too:

There is a widespread assumption in modern social science that social continuity requires no explanation. Supposedly it is not problematical... The assumption of inertia, that cultural and social continuity do not require explanation, obliterates the fact that both have to be recreated anew in each generation, often with great pain and suffering. To maintain and transmit a value system, human beings are punched, bullied, sent to jail, thrown into concentration camps, cajoled, bribed, made into heroes,

<sup>4</sup> Lina Alsaafin, "Joe Biden No Saviour to the Palestinians." Aljazeera, November 8, 2020. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/11/8/joe-biden-no-savior-to-the-palestinians>. Accessed April 17, 2021.

<sup>5</sup> Barbara J. Falk, "The History, Paradoxes, and Utility of Dissent: From State to Global Action" in Ben Dorfman, ed., *Histories, Aesthetics and Cultures of Dissent*. (EPUB: Peter Lang, 2016). Available at <https://www.peterlang.com/view/9783653959826/xhtmll/chapter002.xhtmll>. Accessed April 10, 2021.

<sup>6</sup> Cass Sunstein, 2003. *Why Societies Need Dissent* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003).

<sup>7</sup> Henry David Thoreau, 1848. "Civil Disobedience." <http://xroads.virginia.edu/~HYPER2/thoreau/civil.html>.

encouraged to read newspapers, stood up against a wall and shot, and sometimes even taught sociology.”<sup>8</sup>

These and other works helped to fulfill a core objectives of the seminar: to be compelling, and to reflect on our own readiness to act.

### **BDS compels instructors to face the challenges of professorial authority.**

There is no getting around the fact that for some faculty and students the Palestine-Israel conflict is deeply personal. It may engage issues of heritage, identity, and more (as Karen Culcasi puts it, BDS “can mean wildly different things to different people”<sup>9</sup>). Further, it seems unimaginable that a university instructor would offer such a course without having already formed some prior opinion on BDS. Hopefully their opinion arose through a confrontation of views, a process that Albert Hirschman saw decades ago as one element of well-being.<sup>10</sup>

In any case, the challenge of professorial authority is real for supporters and critics alike. Indeed, it is important to note the distinction between “teaching” and “teaching *about*” BDS. The latter means asking, with Daniel Segal, “[h]ow can I teach what I judge to be truthful about Israel and Palestine without imposing my views on students, that is, through genuine teaching rather than indoctrination.”<sup>11</sup> Recent essays by Segal and Daniel Levine offer excellent discussions for identifying and managing the pedagogical pitfalls of Palestine-Israel.<sup>12</sup>

Admittedly, I have at times evaded sensitive topics in hopes of ensuring all students feel at ease. Yet evasion was not an option once I chose to create a seminar on BDS. Also, I publicly support the movement, so transparency had to be the first step toward mitigating professorial authority. In the first class meeting I summarized my modest personal experience with Palestine-Israel.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>8</sup> Barrington Moore, 1966. *Social Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy: Lord and Peasant in the Making of the Modern World* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press): 485–486.

<sup>9</sup> Karen Culcasi, “Engaging in the Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions (BDS) Debate,” *Geographical Review* 106.2 (2016): 258.

<sup>10</sup> Hirschman, Albert O. 1989. “Having Opinions – One of the Elements of Well-Being?” *The American Economic Review* (79) 2: 75–79.

<sup>11</sup> Segal, Daniel. 2019. “Teaching Palestine-Israel: A Pedagogy of Delay and Suspension.” *Review of Middle East Studies* 53 (1): 83–88; 83.

<sup>12</sup> In addition to Segal above, see Levine, Daniel. 2021. “Uncomfortable Conversations at a Distance: Lessons from Teaching the Israel-Palestine Conflict.” <https://duckofminerva.com/2021/01/uncomfortable-conversations-at-a-distance-lessons-from-teaching-the-israel-palestine-conflict.html>. Accessed April 21, 2021.

<sup>13</sup> I told students that I was raised broadly sympathetic toward Labor Zionism (my brother lived a year on a kibbutz), and first traveled to East Jerusalem and the West Bank in 1991 while a graduate fellow at the University of Jordan. Israeli soldiers often assumed I was Palestinian, and subjected me to intimidating and humiliating situations. I returned as a field-based West Bank and Gaza program officer for the National Democratic Institute, working from 1994–96 in support of the Oslo Peace Process. During that time, I worked closely with Palestinian individuals, officials, and NGOs, as well as, to a lesser degree, their Israeli counterparts. I witnessed daily confrontations between

I also told students that I chose to support BDS only after initial reluctance. We then googled my name and key words like “professor” and “Israel,” which revealed a number of accusations directed towards me, including antisemitism. However, I never told them why I first hesitated to support BDS, why I changed my mind, or my justifications for doing so. I hoped these omissions would help students to arrive at opinions as independently as possible. Of course, the choices I made regarding the seminar’s content and design – including the original choice to make it about BDS – inevitably influences student decision making (more on that later).

### **BDS provides a revealing look into the state of Middle East studies.**

Apart from the google exercise in the first class, I did not emphasize this point in my 2019 course. But I intend to do so next time.

What is the value in showing students not only the intellectual but also the sometimes personal, zero-sum side of the BDS controversy? Perhaps the best answer is: Why shouldn’t students see our dirty laundry? They have already internalized media’s balkanization and acute partisanship, and probably intuited academe’s imperfections. Like Palestine-Israel itself, BDS is a paradox: Studying it is both good for you – in thinking about dissent, becoming a better teacher, etc. – and may kill your career.<sup>14</sup> Is there a better antidote to professorial authority than seeing learned professors go after each other? Forewarned is forearmed, too, for students considering graduate school. A friendly academic advised me to avoid studying Palestine-Israel when I looked at PhD programs in the 1990s; clueing in the next generation is almost a professional obligation.

One exercise I am considering for the seminar’s next iteration is an analysis of MESA’s 2015 resolution “Regarding the Protection of Free Discussion on Academic Boycott of Israel.”<sup>15</sup> Students would discuss why it was deemed necessary to produce such a document. Some might research the individual cases that inspired its passing. Such meta-exercises may underscore the many political contexts within which BDS operates.

### **BDS highlights the value of comparative and interdisciplinary approaches.**

The seminar included a case study on the long struggle against apartheid in South Africa, which ended in the early 1990s (some BDS-related syllabi include other cases such as Northern Ireland). The BDS webpage cites this struggle, in which

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Palestinians and Israeli soldiers, the latter frequently mistaking me for Palestinian and treating me accordingly. Since that time, my trips to Palestine and Israel have been short and infrequent, mostly to observe Palestinian elections. I traveled with Palestinian invitees to South Africa in 1994 as well, to observe the first post-apartheid election.

<sup>14</sup> The bitter aftermath of such zero-sum academic conflicts may be seen in former professor Steve Salaita’s blog, especially his recent essay, “The Utility of Uselessness” at <https://stevesalaita.com/the-utility-of-uselessness/>. Accessed April 21, 2021.

<sup>15</sup> <https://mesana.org/about/resolutions>. Accessed April 2, 2021.

international boycotts and sanctions featured prominently, as the movement's primary inspiration.<sup>16</sup> BDS supporters seek to emulate the successful, non-violent, global anti-apartheid effort. The overt comparison of Israeli policies with South African apartheid is also one of the most contentious aspects of BDS. All this (perhaps ironically) makes the case study's inclusion analytically necessary.

To discuss the comparison's usefulness, students read historical overviews as well as texts focusing on specific aspects of the decades-long struggle. To provide general familiarity with the South African case and a glimpse of life under apartheid, they read excerpts from well-known histories by Nancy Clark and William Worger, Robert Ross, as well as Catherine Barnes on the effects of global isolation.<sup>17</sup> Readings from Lindsay Michie Eades<sup>18</sup> and Adrian Guelke<sup>19</sup> address the efficacy of sanctions and the role of the United States. Julie Peteet offers a strong take on the value and politics of comparing South Africa and Palestine-Israel, contending the comparison "de-exceptionalizes apartheid as a particularly South African mode of colonialism and challenges the notion that the Jewish state is a unique historical phenomenon..."<sup>20</sup>

Importantly, these works alone are written by four historians (Clarke and Worger, Ross, Eades), a comparative political scientist (Guelke), a conflict resolution expert (Barnes), and an anthropologist (Peteet). BDS therefore demonstrates to undergraduates (in this case, political science and international affairs majors) how full consideration of such movements requires comparative and interdisciplinary approaches.

### Arguing BDS helps us make better decisions.

Is BDS fair? Constructive? Racist? How we arrive at these views may be as important as the pro or con positions we ultimately adopt. Later in the semester, students responded to several prompts as they considered arguments by BDS proponents and critics.

For example, to better understand "What is BDS?" I assigned the BDS website, especially the sections "About BDS," "About BNC," "About PACBI," and "FAQs,"<sup>21</sup> and Nicola Pratt's separate supportive essay "Boycott, Divestment, Sanctions: Myths and Realities."<sup>22</sup> To better grasp questions of how BDS affects

<sup>16</sup> See "Intro to BDS." <https://bdsmovement.net/what-is-bds>. Accessed April 22, 2021.

<sup>17</sup> Nancy Clark and William Worger, 2004, *South Africa: The Rise and Fall of Apartheid* (Pearson, 2004), especially 35–110. Robert Ross, *A Concise History of South Africa* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 114–162. Catherine Barnes, "International Isolation and Pressure for Change in South Africa" 19 *Accord* (2008). Available at <https://www.c-r.org/accord/incentives-sanctions-and-conditionality/international-isolation-and-pressure-change-south>. Accessed April 10, 2021.

<sup>18</sup> Lindsay Michie Eades, *The End of Apartheid in South Africa* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1999), 77–99.

<sup>19</sup> Adrian Guelke, *Rethinking the Rise and Fall of Apartheid* (Houndsmills: Palgrave, 2005), 188–207.

<sup>20</sup> Julie Peteet, 2016. "The Work of Comparison: Israel/Palestine and Apartheid," *Anthropological Quarterly* 89 (1): 247–281; 276.

<sup>21</sup> Found at <https://bdsmovement.net/what-is-bds>. Accessed April 12, 2021.

<sup>22</sup> Nicola Pratt, 2015. "Boycott, Divestment, Sanctions: Myths and Realities." *Jadaliyya*. <https://www.jadaliyya.com/Details/31745>. Accessed April 18, 2021.

US interests, and how US domestic politics affect BDS, they researched the various positions taken during the 2019 Senate and House anti-BDS votes.<sup>23</sup>

I also prompted students to “Evaluate the ethics and praxis of competing BDS arguments.” Here, they read Karen Culcasi’s overview, “Engaging the Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions (BDS) Debate,” and the other six essays from the BDS-centered 2016 forum of the *Geographical Review*.<sup>24</sup> These essays are useful for their divergent viewpoints as well as for their varying lines of argument (as when, for example, Sheshkin and Felson contend that BDS may be as much a function of ignorance as of antisemitism). Students were encouraged to research the various claims made by essay contributors. Together, we also watched the theatrical 2017 BDS debate between Cornel West and Alan Dershowitz.<sup>25</sup>

The seminar concluded with group presentations titled “Why BDS is a good idea” and “Why BDS is a bad idea.” I instructed students to cooperate to present the strongest possible cases based on the readings and their independent research, and regardless of their personal beliefs about BDS. They were also tasked with forming solid counterarguments. The spirit was “to mix the delights of winning an argument with the pleasures of being good listeners.”<sup>26</sup> Since past courses have shown direct debates to be largely unproductive and unnecessarily divisive, the randomly-assigned groups presented on different days.

## Looking ahead

An undergraduate seminar on BDS raises serious pedagogical concerns. Teaching about a contemporary movement is an inescapably political act. Complete fairness and providing adequate historical context are probably insurmountable problems. Yet – for reasons stated – I do not think these concerns rise to the level of good excuses for not teaching about BDS.

Did students feel pressured to support certain positions? It’s hard to say. For what they are worth, the formal student evaluations were uniformly positive: the course scored higher than both departmental and College of Arts and Sciences averages on all six questions related to the students’ learning and classroom experience. I believe embracing transparency helped mitigate the worst aspects of professorial authority. It probably also helped that most

<sup>23</sup> See, for example, <https://thehill.com/homenews/house/454399-house-passes-bill-opposing-bds-exposing-democratic-divides>. Accessed April 18, 2021.

<sup>24</sup> The readings are found in *Geographical Review* 106 (2) April 2016, available via JSTOR. Each is about 8 pages. Pro-BDS arguments are presented by Robert B. Ross, “No Space for Apartheid: Toward an Academic Boycott of Israel Among Geographers”; Yousef Munayyer, “BDS: Where It Came From and Where It is Headed”; and Ghazi-Walid Falah, “Does a Boycott of Israeli Academic Institutions Help in Ending Israel’s Military Occupation of the Palestinian territories?” Opposed to BDS are David Newman, “The Failure of Academic Boycotts”; and Ira M. Sheshkin and Ethan Felson, “Is the Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions Movement Tainted by Anti-Semitism?”

<sup>25</sup> Available on C-SPAN: <https://www.c-span.org/video/?437547-1/cornel-west-alan-dershowitz-mideast-debate>. Accessed April 21, 2021.

<sup>26</sup> Hirschman, 78.

students were seniors within our department, and seemed already to be on friendly terms. A BDS-centered freshmen seminar may not work as well.

When I reprise the seminar, I intend to make improvements apart from those already mentioned. First, the students really enjoy discussing ethics, and I believe more material on the ethical dimensions of boycotts and dissent is desirable. In course evaluations, some students also suggested focusing more on specific actors “like the PLO or important people.” Despite concerns, I think they are right to ask that the seminar incorporate more “faces.” Presenting someone to credit or blame is analytically problematic and encourages oversimplification, but it also raises undergraduates’ interest, without which the seminar is pointless. I think the risks inherent in this approach are manageable through class discussions. Ideally, the seminar will incorporate the faces and stories of less “important” people, too.

I will also continue to seek better readings on South Africa. I was struck by what stood out for students about the anti-apartheid struggle. Most viewed it as an instance of moral clarity, despite the stark divides that actually existed among activists and policymakers of the time. Another issue that propelled discussion was whether supporting BDS is the right thing to do if boycotts and sanctions hurt those they intend to benefit – also a troubling concern for actors in the South African case.

A final thought: While instructors may recognize BDS’ pedagogical potential, some may need “cover” from colleagues or groups that seek to quash discussion of the movement. We all should be seeking ways to normalize teaching about BDS and to dispel the Palestine-Israel paradox.

The creation of a reputable online resource for teaching about BDS may help in this regard. Perhaps a pedagogically-inclined group, disciplinarily and politically diverse, could do so. This online site could offer in one place primary and secondary sources, exemplary pro and con essays, readings on the movement’s history and comparable cases, lists of major works on the ethics of dissent and boycotts/sanctions, and so forth. Despite challenges, done well and transparently this proposed resource might encourage more faculty – BDS supporters and critics alike – to bring the controversy into their classroom.

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