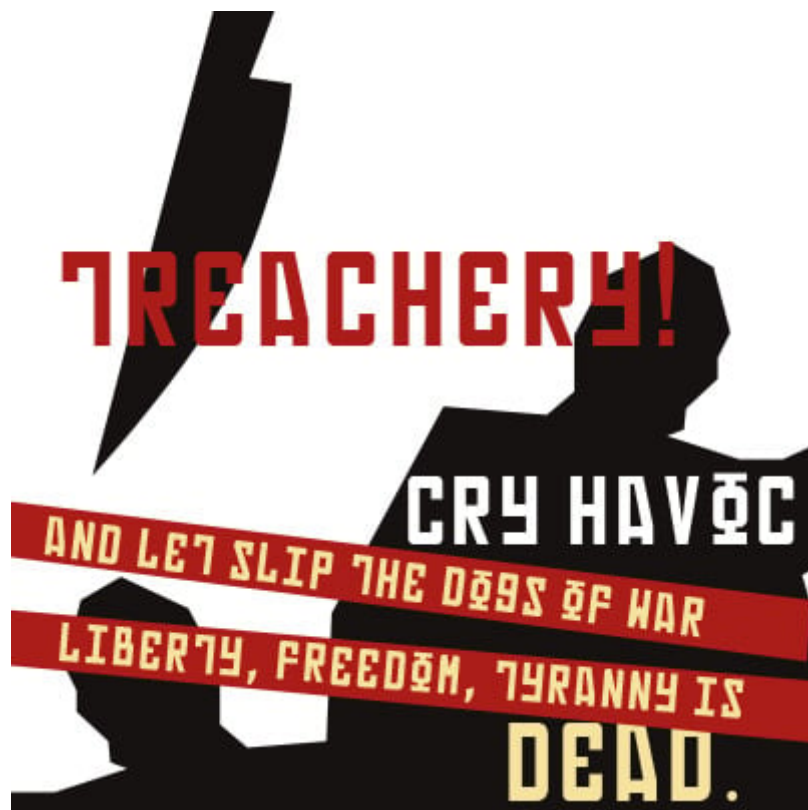


Academics Reject BDS

by Michael Curtis



There is a tide in academic and political matters which taken at the flood may lead on to tolerance and respect for civilized behavior. That surge, if not a torrent, may occur as result of a decision on June 14, 2017 by members of the Modern Language Association. For some time members of US academic institutions, succumbing to pressure of Palestinian groups and their academic fellow travelers, have devoted a considerable amount of time in university gatherings to call for boycotts of Israeli academic institutions and personnel, and in endorsing the Palestinian call for BDS, boycott, divestment and sanctions, against the State of Israel.

All these misguided activities are in essence attempts to subvert the free flow of ideas and the true nature of university behavior, while displaying anger, provocative, invective, sanctimonious and false propaganda, even if not intimating a case for assassination as in the recent New York

production of Julius Caesar. Like the plotters of Caesar's assassination whose actions did not lead to a just society but instead to civil war and the end of the Roman Republic, the rhetoric, biased and bigoted anti-Israeli resolutions do not lead to any advantage for Palestinians but lead to the violation of the nature of higher education and undermining the principles of free speech and academic freedom.

The would-be boycotters and card carrying members of the BDS movement resemble not lighted fools but those imposing darkness on and violating the principle of intellectual interchange. Moreover, like the assassins of Caesar, they are haters, and obsessed with the supposed villain, in their case only one particular country rather than one individual. Happily, some academic bodies are challenging that hatred.

The initial problem is whether academics should respond to political issues outside of their supposed professional expertise. Perhaps the vote of the American History Association in 2007 to condemn US participation in the war in Iraq can be considered marginal. But almost all attempts at condemnation of particular political activities concern Israel. Rationally, one would think that most members at professional meetings of their academic bodies would be attending sessions concerning their subject, whether anthropology, cultural studies, or psychology, rather than heated, controversial political debates on one particular country.

Does the American Studies Association have a foreign policy? The ASA has a small membership but the purported teachers of American Studies appear to spend time on issues of imperialism and settler colonialism. On December 4, 2013 the ASA voted by 66% of its members to boycott Israeli universities and some Israeli cultural institutions.

The ASA boycott was condemned by a number of heads of universities. Harvard President Drew Gilpin Faust on December

20, 2013 said, "the recent resolution of the ASA proposing to boycott Israeli universities represents a direct threat to those ideals which universities and scholarly associations should be dedicated to defend."

In December 2015 the National Women's Studies Association voted, by 88%, for a boycott and endorsed the Palestinian call for BDS. Curiously, it declared it was "expressing feminist solidarity," though Israel is the only place in the Middle East where such solidarity exists.

But the tide is coming in. The American Historical Association (AHA) in January 2015, reversed its previous position, and voted 144-55 against a resolution endorsing BDS. In January 2016 the AHA by vote of 111-51 rejected a resolution to sanction Israel over alleged violations of Palestinian academic freedom. The resolution did not call for BDS but was supported by a group of "Historians against the war" that had called for BDS in 2005, when two anti-Israeli resolutions were passed.

The American Anthropological Association on June 7, 2016 defeated , though very narrowly, 2423-2384 with a vote of 51% of its eligible members, a call for economic boycott of Israel.

The MLA has struck a blow for sanity. In January 2014 its delegates voted, 59-41, for a resolution supporting the Palestinian struggle against racism. In January 2017 at its annual convention in Philadelphia, the Delegate Assembly rejected by 113-79 a BDS resolution , but adopted 101-93 a resolution initiated by the "Members for Justice in Palestine" to condemn Israel. MLA rules require that measures adopted by the Delegate Assembly be sent to the full membership for approval. Another rule is that 10% of MLA members must vote in favor of a resolution for it to become policy.

In June 2017 there were 18,279 eligible voters, requiring

1,828 votes for ratification. The resolution to refrain from boycotting passed by 1,954 to 885, and thus is policy. The resolution clearly stated that endorsing the Palestinian campaign for the academic and cultural boycott of Israel contradicts the MLA's purpose to promote teaching and research on language and literature. It blocks possible dialogue and general scholarly exchange with Israel.

There is now increasing recognition that BDS is harmful in a number of ways. It prevents, not encourages international cooperation. It does nothing to help the Palestinians, economically or politically. It ignored the reality that Israeli universities are continually increasing the number of Arab students. Today, 15% of bachelor's degree students are Arabs, 10% of master's degree students are Arabs were 10 pc, and 6% of doctoral students are Arabs.

The real meaning and implications of BDS is now clear in three ways. As Lawrence Summers said, boycotts are antisemitic in their effect, if not necessarily in their intent. They certainly aim at denying the rights of eight million Israelis. Secondly, many if not most of BDS advocates are not really concerned about any particular aspect of Israeli affairs or policies but are interested in the elimination of the State of Israel. The BDS advocates, like many of the organs of the United Nations, characterize Israel as the only country in the world guilty of abuses, while there is silence or ignorance of all other countries. The decision of the MLA on June 14, 2017 should start the tide surging in the right direction.