

Challenging Double Standards

A Call Against the Boycott of Israeli Art and Society

To The Signees of Current Boycott Initiatives Regarding Israel

We are writing to you about a political issue, which increasingly causes us anxiety: how artists, and individuals affiliated with the arts address conflict in the Middle East. Over the past months topics including the occupation of the West Bank, Israel's existence as a Jewish state, Palestinian resistance and its struggles, international solidarity and boycott movements, and criticism of Israeli policies, have been taken up in the arts arena with heightened intensity. We are deeply concerned by several aspects of how such issues are approached.

With this letter we are advocating against reductive, binary views of conflict in the Middle East. We believe in the role of art to question and resist dichotomous views. We see dialogue as a critical part of any conceivable peace resolution between Palestine and Israel, and are troubled by the tendency among international boycott movements—particularly cultural boycott movements supported by individuals in the arts—which make dialogue impossible. Such dialogue inside Palestine and Israel is difficult, and is only made more precarious by unilateral international boycott. Underlying these movements, we fear there is an upswing of anti-Semitic attitudes and attacks, which seem to convey varying degrees of intentionality. Neglecting or simplifying significant historical legacies, Israel is treated as a paradigmatic colonial power, and is boycotted in a way that no other country is. Such discrimination and double standards, whether explicitly stated or implied, demand to be addressed.

The Upswing of International Protest

This letter intends to draw attention to the upswing of protest targeting Israel, Israeli institutions, as well as Jewish organizations and individual artists, during the last months and increasingly following the Gaza war. To name just a few examples: the Tricycle Theatre

in London refused to host the UK Jewish Film Festival; the organizers of the São Paulo Biennial were requested to return sponsorship funds accepted from the Israeli state; at the Edinburgh Fringe Theatre Festival an Israeli co-production was disrupted by protesters; and the Greek Kakogiannis Foundation was put under pressure for collaborating with the University of Jerusalem. At the same time, the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions movement (BDS) established a dedicated Arts Coalition. The BDS Arts Coalition (<http://bdsartscoalition.org/>) was founded prior to the Gaza war in June 2014 and advocates the boycott of Israeli institutions, in line with the BDS principles, which proclaim a comprehensive boycott of Israel on economic, academic and cultural levels. In its initial statement the BDS Arts Coalition requested artists to withdraw from the travelling art exhibition *Living as Form (The Nomadic Version)*, presented at two Israeli institutions, a foundation-run art gallery and artist-in-residence program (Artport Tel Aviv) and the technical University of Haifa (Technion).

All calls and open letters were signed by a large number of individuals and groups affiliated with the arts fields; respected friends and colleagues among them. All these events took place in a climate where the Gaza war alongside its many atrocities provoked numerous anti-Semitic incidents, including physical attacks on Jews and Jewish institutions—none of which was reflected or even mentioned by the groups and contexts appealing for boycott. None of these groups condemned Hamas, an organization with an openly anti-Semitic agenda, which seeks the destruction of Israel. We are worried by this silence, which could either imply that the BDS Arts Coalition and similar initiatives are not equipped to discern anti-Semitic discrimination, or that such discrimination is ignored for tactical reasons. So we decided to share some critical reflections, mostly related to the BDS agenda.

Boycott as a Political Strategy

Boycott is a powerful instrument of political dissent and protest. In civil rights and anti-colonial liberation struggles boycotting has been used in the fight for de-colonization and justice, developed as a strategy to reach out to the world from *within* the affected country. Without internal perspective, boycotting can seriously harm unintended targets. To avoid collateral damages and judgments based on simplistic conclusions it is essential to have on-site knowledge. In the case of boycotting Israel however, the BDS movement is mainly active in academic and cultural contexts *outside* the country. It thus often lacks on-site knowledge and aggravates the tense situation, rather than contributing to peace building. On the contrary: rather than opposing “normalization”, as BDS frequently states, its actions indicate a leaning towards maximalist positions.

Boycott is not necessarily an emancipatory act of solidarity with the oppressed and in opposition to the oppressor. The Jewish experience especially in Europe reflects a contrasting effect: anti-Jewish boycotts were once organized against the Jews to exclude them from social, economic, and political life. In these cases, boycott had no anti-colonial implication. Instead, it functioned as a means of oppression by the dominant societies toward Jewish minorities. We are concerned that the language used and political strategies advocated by international boycott movements—among other Left-identified political groups—take the conflict between Israel and Palestine to epitomize neo-colonial evil as such. This view frames the conflict as part of a non-specific eternal battle between good and evil, between “oppressed” and “oppressors.” We ask for a critical approach to dichotomous narratives: Within the tendency to reduce the conflict between Israel and Palestine to that between good and evil, boycott is often romanticized as a political strategy and there is a great danger that the nature of colonial oppression, or of evil, is simplified. Particularly in the case of internationally-staged cultural or academic boycott movements, we fear the tendency to support polarized views. Since its formation in 2005 the BDS movement has been both supported and criticized for framing the conflict in a binary perspective, and for its punitive agenda and actions.

To be clear, we are advocating for a just peace for both conflict parties in Israel and Palestine, and our frustrations arise from this perspective. We insist on the importance of condemning both: injustice against Palestinians *and* the singling out of Israel as the perpetrator country, discrimination against Palestinians *and* forms of anti-Zionism fueled by anti-Semitism.

Who to Boycott?

Boycott as a political strategy requires careful consideration and an accurate evaluation of each context in which it is applied. Turning boycott into a doctrine and declaring it on an entire country and its citizens is generalizing and reductive. In the case of Israel, it is problematic and hardly justifiable. No one, for example, would boycott Pussy Riot for being in possession of Russian passports, not even if they were to throw their political agenda out the window. No one would threaten independent institutions, whether critical or silent regarding the policy of the country they are in, except in the case of Israel.

If boycott, divestment, and sanctions are considered as appropriate strategies to contest injustice through international solidarity movements, why are they not applied to the other uncountable countries committing injustices? Why didn't anybody boycott cultural workers from Serbia and Croatia because of the genocidal war crimes committed by their respective countries? Why not boycott Spain for occupying the Basque country, Great Britain for oppressing Northern-Ireland, India for occupying Kashmir or Angola for occupying

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against Brazil and Canada

for denying the first nations rights, and against the US for

maintaining and deploying the world's largest military complex? Is it because "someone"

decided that Israel ranks as the most unjust country in the world? And if yes: *why* is that the

case?



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Could it be that we feel too comfortable in our privileged lives, our civic rights, or our consumerist culture enabled by some of the above-mentioned states and their institutions—but still want to oppose oppression on ideological grounds? We believe that the collective desire for a “signifier of oppression” is exactly what makes Israel the only target of current international boycott movements.

It is important to not ignore the history of anti-Jewish discourse. Anti-Jewish boycott has often accompanied anti-Semitism as one of its dangerous manifestations. Contacts with Jews have been historically avoided; Jews were not accepted in merchants' guilds, trade associations, and similar organizations. In many European countries toward the end of the nineteenth century, the anti-Jewish boycott became one of the basic weapons used for victimizing the Jewish population. After the Nazi rise to power in Germany the government publicly announced a general anti-Jewish boycott.

Double Standards and the De-legitimation of Israel as a State

The BDS movement has been criticized by various actors across the political spectrum for applying the double standards we hereby mention. The conflict is emotionally highly charged, especially for most Palestinians and Israelis and for a lot of other Jews, Arabs, and others related to it. It is also understandable that activists are attracted to the subject. But when the emotional and political engagement in this conflict grows out of proportion to the extent that it becomes virtually and publicly a mass phenomenon, it may be time to ask: why Israel?

Again, we believe this is due to the role of Israel as “signifier of oppression” and we argue that this rhetoric simplifies questions related to Israel's very existence. One of the most discussed issues regarding BDS-politics and its double standards is its denial of the Jewish people's right to self-determination and its de-legitimization of Israel as a state. This point has been stressed not only by pro-Israel activists, but also by leftist public intellectuals like Noam Chomsky or Norman Finkelstein who can hardly be accused of being Israel apologists. Both criticize the BDS movement's demand of a one-state-solution and of the right of return for Palestinian refugees, which includes their descendants, and would

ultimately lead to the destruction of Israel as a Jewish and democratic state. To this effect they criticize the BDS movement for being hypocritical in calling for peace and human rights on the one hand, while fuelling the conflict with demands that would result in the end of the Israeli state on the other.

In our view, BDS's simplifying narratives, together with its biased demands, foster an atmosphere that enables and even provokes attacks on Jews and Jewish institutions. We are concerned by the under-representation of positions in support of both the Palestinian cause and Israel's right to exist—and by the tendency to dismiss any questioning of the international Palestinian solidarity movement as right wing pro-Israeli propaganda. We propose to think about this carefully.

Against Simplification

The purpose of this letter is not to silence criticism; rather, we aim to challenge the dichotomized discursive battlefield. We don't believe that all of us have to agree on each and every argument—that's impossible!—but we insist on nuanced dialogue. Taking boycott as a doctrine rather than a case-specific political strategy makes such dialogue impossible. If we believe in the ability of art to tackle complex situations and political questions in a progressive manner, the task of art lies in insisting on specificity and subjectivity rather than simplifying context; insisting on reflection rather than reflex. We ask spaces of art and cultural production to deal actively with contradictions rather than ignoring them, and to question political propaganda rather than being subsumed by it.

Therefore, we call on all individuals affiliated to the arts that come across demonizing attempts such as the BDS, to be critical and express this by contesting the underlying simplification. We ask you to seriously consider what triggers ongoing debates about the right of Israel to exist, what consequences the BDS-led support of the Palestinian struggle entails for both peoples as well as the peace process, and what binary frames and narratives are being used. We believe that both nations have the right to their states within the land known alternately as historic Palestine and historic Judea, and that both should strive for peace and just solutions together through mutual dialogue and neighborly cooperation. However, the guiding principles of that dialogue should be determined by the people that will actually be living together, side by side in peace with their neighbors. We call all friends and colleagues who signed the BDS Arts Coalition letter and similar resolutions to look into the history and presence of the BDS movement, to analyze its aims and strategies, to take into account these criticisms and to reconsider whether you want to support such a position.

This letter reflects the collective efforts of—and ongoing discussion among—individuals involved in the spheres of arts and culture in varying capacities; we consider ourselves as part of the left and have varying relationships to Israel and Palestine. As a collective we have benefited from and been challenged by the variety of opinions, perspectives, and experiences of the individuals among us. We hope that this letter models an alternative approach to the dismissive and problematic positions we criticize.

Please forward this letter widely.

Sincerely,

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Julia Edthofer

Benjy Fox-Rosen

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Till Gathmann

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Sarah Mendelsohn

Suzana Milevska

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