Boycott everything

The renewed calls for an academic boycott of Israel (see the Opinion article by Steven Rose in this issue) raise the fundamental question of whether and how this sanction should be applied.

Boycotts can be effective when the target is appropriate, when the case is clear-cut, when the boycotters represent a substantive constituency, and when other means of redress are not available. A recent example of an effective boycott at the community level concerns a pub in Australia that unwisely opened its doors to occasional shows by neo-Nazi bands. The resulting boycott of the venue by aficionados of the alternative music scene in Melbourne was a main factor in the pub's eventual closure in 2008. However, a campaign aimed at a worldwide boycott of Australian wines would have had no such effect. Its impact on an inappropriate target—Australian wine producers—would probably have been miniscule, and its effect on the real target—the miscreant pub manager who just happened to serve Australian wine—would have been zero.

During the Vietnam War, the USA dropped millions of tons of explosives and chemical weapons on the countries of Indochina, and Americans in uniform committed well-documented atrocities. Remarkably, despite substantial international protest and internal US opposition, which eventually forced an end to the war, no high-placed US official has ever been indicted for war crimes. Would an academic boycott of America have forced more drastic action to end the war? Would it have restrained the carpet-bombing of Cambodia? Would denying American plant biologists the right to publish their findings or to participate in international congresses have brought an early halt to the military use of the synthetic auxin Agent Orange? Perhaps such a boycott could have been targeted more specifically at silencing Arthur Galston, the Yale professor who discovered

its defoliant properties. Alas, this wouldn't have been much use either; Galston was appalled by the use to which his findings were put, and was a vociferous opponent of the war. In fact, he visited Vietnam several times during the war to witness the devastation for himself. Silencing him would just have got Nixon off the hook.

The failed Soviet occupation of Afghanistan was, by all accounts, far more brutal than anything the Israelis have perpetrated in Gaza. But was the disintegration of the USSR and its European empire brought about by Western academics refusing to cooperate with or contact their Soviet counterparts? Would the collapse of the Berlin Wall have been hastened had I declined the invitation from Moscow State University in 1988 to give a seminar about mitochondrial DNA replication?

We all applauded those scientists in the Soviet Union, most notably Academician Sakharov, who spoke out about the iniquities of the Communist system and its long history of oppression. But it was the regime itself that instituted the biggest academic boycott, by preventing all contact between Sakharov and foreign physicists during the six years of his internal exile (1980–1986) in Gorky (now Nizhny Novgorod). During this time he was allowed to discuss particle physics only with his paediatrician wife.

The international campaign for his rehabilitation and freedom was, in my opinion, an example of a legitimate boycott. The target of the campaign was a state action against a scientist. For Western physicists to have maintained normal contact with their Soviet counterparts, at a time when the USSR's most brilliant scientist was effectively locked up in a small apartment in the middle of nowhere, would have been obviously inappropriate. The interventions of the US National Academy of Sciences might, indeed, have saved Sakharov's life. Whether they were instrumental in his spectacular restoration in 1986 is more questionable,

although his symbolic prominence was certainly used by Gorbachev in his final, desperate attempts to reform and save the Soviet system.

A less successful academic boycott was that of the 1998 International Congress of Genetics in Beijing by the UK Genetics Society, in protest at the Chinese Maternal and Infant Health Law that was held to be eugenic in intent and practice. The boycott was barely visible, and a bioethics session at the congress stridently repudiated its chief premise. The law is still in place and most Chinese scientists, clinicians and citizens are actively implementing it. An ineffectual boycott can make the boycotter look foolish and might even harm his cause.

As Sakharov himself wrote in his Nobel Lecture (1975): “we should not minimize our sacred endeavours in this world, where, like faint glimmers in the dark, we have emerged for a moment from the nothingness of dark unconsciousness into material existence.” Taking this as our guiding principle, boycotting fellow scientists is something to be used only in extreme circumstances, to protect, rather than thwart, the quest for knowledge and human dignity.

At this point in time, Israel's scientists have not been harassed by the state, even though many of them have raised brave voices of criticism against their own government. Like all other countries, Israel is subject to international law. Any accusations of illegal conduct in war can and should be dealt with under the jurisdiction of the International Criminal Court or equivalent bodies set up by the world community. *In extremis*, enforcement of its decisions, as well as dealing more generally with any state that threatens peace and security, is a matter for the UN Security Council. It seems to me that an academic boycott is completely irrelevant in such circumstances.

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