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# The Threat to Academic Freedom

*The AAUP about-face on boycotts contravenes  
its founding ideals*



THE AMERICAN Association of University Professors does not often issue pronouncements that cause a firestorm. But the AAUP did exactly that on a quiet Monday last summer. For nearly 20 years, this once-august institution had opposed boycotts of academic institutions as incompatible with its founding *raison d'être*: academic freedom. Then it reversed course. Academic boycotts, it declared, were “legitimate tactical responses to conditions that are fundamentally incompatible with the mission of higher education.” In fact, the AAUP argued, its new stance was *more* consistent with academic freedom because it would allow “individual faculty members and students...to weigh, assess, and debate the specific circumstances giving rise to calls for systematic academic boycotts and to make their own choices regarding their participation in them. To do otherwise contravenes academic freedom.”

The AAUP's embrace of academic boycotts as an acceptable way of producing political change is dangerous. It threatens to transform, for the worse, a system of higher education that has rightly long been credited with serving the public good. The new statement does not speak for us, and we hope it does not speak for our colleagues across the world. We were heartened that our counter-statement — opposing academic boycotts and articulating the traditional, shared foundational values of the scholarly community, and backed by no organization or authority and possessing no mailing list of tens of thousands — accumulated more than 3,000 signatures from fellow scholars in its first week. We suspect that it speaks for the silent majority.

To those outside the academy, this might seem like an obscure and minor quarrel. It isn't. The future of the university, and therefore the state of academic freedom, is of immense significance to all human beings, Jews not least. The pursuit of knowledge is a profoundly Jewish value, and it is no accident that Jews have disproportionately scaled the heights of the academy across the West. Universities once were, and often still are, sites of tremendous intellectual ferment and creativity, and they have been remarkable engines of economic growth and socioeconomic mobility. While the AAUP cannot undo all that by a mere pronouncement or shift in policy, we must all do our part to ensure that this perversion of academic freedom does not take root.

### *Academic Freedom: An Origin Story*

The idea of academic freedom took shape gradually through the 18th and 19th centuries. Before then, institutions of higher education were largely religious seminaries, and faculty who expressed or taught ideas contrary to Christian belief could be punished with death, not simply dismissal.

As universities freed themselves from religious authority, they discovered that the secular state could prove an equally repressive overseer. Only in the 19th century, with the birth of the modern research university, did faculty begin to firmly and collectively press for freedom in conducting their research and in teaching. At the end of that century, faculty members in the United States learned that such freedoms were fragile even when state control was relatively weak. The robber barons of corporate America could be equally impatient with faculty views. There was growing awareness that faculty needed a national organization to define, promote, and defend their autonomy in research, teaching, and extramural expression.

The result: the establishment in 1915 of the AAUP. Its founding declaration remains a forceful statement of what academic freedom is and why it is in the public interest. “Genuine boldness and thoroughness of inquiry, and freedom of speech, are scarcely reconcilable with the prescribed inculcation of a particular opinion upon a controverted question,” it announced. Academic freedom means that neither politicians nor trustees nor civil society groups have the “moral right to bind the reason or the conscience of any professor.” What’s more, academic freedom is very much in the interest of society.

To the degree that professional scholars, in the formation and promulgation of their opinions, are, or by the character of their tenure appear to be, subject to any motive other than their own scientific conscience and a desire for the respect of their fellow experts, to that degree the university teaching profession is corrupted; its proper influence upon public opinion is diminished and vitiated; and society at large fails to get from its scholars, in an unadulterated form, the peculiar and necessary service which it is the office of the professional scholar to furnish.

The AAUP's assertion that individual faculty members had the right to academic freedom did not automatically make it so. Repression of leftist political opinion in the American academy remained prevalent from the First World War to the early Cold War. Academic freedom remained fragile and uneven. On two significant occasions, under intense political pressure, the AAUP itself failed to live up to its principles. In 1917, amid national war fervor, the AAUP warned against anti-war sentiment and, when faculty members were fired, announced that academic freedom should give way to patriotism. A quarter-century later, when at least a hundred faculty members were dismissed in the 1950s for their suspected leftist political leanings, the AAUP was too afraid of itself becoming the target of the anti-Communist witch hunt to defend their rights. It admitted its failure only when the worst of the Red Scare was over.

Nevertheless, academic freedom slowly and unevenly became an established norm after the Second World War. It liberated faculty members to demand that their universities eliminate racial and religious quotas and stamp out outright prejudice toward minorities. A more racially, ethnically, and ideologically diverse student body defended their professors' right to join them in protesting Jim Crow and the Vietnam War. The depoliticized ideal of academic freedom and a more inclusive and vibrant university mutually reinforced each other. Moreover, academic freedom inexorably spread. Individual faculty members' right to choose what they would research helped lead, however slowly, to the idea that students had the right to choose for themselves what they would study—rather than faculty and administrators making choices for them based on discriminatory assumptions about race, gender, and cultural background. Academic freedom thus operated in tandem with other democratizing forces, including the GI Bill, to broaden access

to higher education, facilitate socioeconomic mobility, and make possible many of the great achievements of postwar America.

The strength of the American university system and, until recently, its growing inclusiveness underpin America's postwar success story. American universities have historically been the envy of the world, partly because scholars have been free to pursue their passions and take intellectual chances, and partly because the substantive promise and merit of one's scholarship have long outweighed considerations of politics and identity. This is the legacy of academic freedom. Take it away, and university professors are in danger of becoming mere apparatchiks whose research devolves into proving presumed truths rather than exposing those alleged truths to harsh analytical and empirical light.

The flip side of academic freedom is academic responsibility. From the start, the AAUP made brief forays into establishing standards for responsible faculty conduct, largely revolving around the guarantee of a minimum standard of civility in faculty affairs. Although these standards were advisory, not regulative, and although they were more vague than the AAUP's guidelines for academic freedom, they nonetheless helped integrate a more diverse community of faculty members into the academy half a century later.

By the end of the 20th century, however, those standards showed signs of erosion, as the faculty began to reflect the political polarization of the rest of American society. Two and a half decades later, the AAUP's implicit code of conduct has little sway. In some quarters, *civility* is thought primarily to be a code word for repressing faculty speech rather than a valued means of facilitating productive dialogue among colleagues and scholars. When in 2023 the newly founded Faculty for Justice in Palestine urged its members to abstain from engaging with Zionist colleagues, it became clear that the very concept of a "faculty" — a single collec-

tive body bound together by a common mission, ethic, and identity — had become outmoded.

### *Under Assault from Left and Right*

Academic freedom reached an apex in the United States in the last quarter of the 20th century. But it has been under assault in the 21st—from Right and Left alike. In Texas and Utah, the Right is forging ahead with the great, redemptive project of banning books. In Florida, it has decided to mount what is sure to be a thoroughly incompetent and destructive project of monitoring college syllabi about the Israeli–Palestinian conflict. Numerous bills under consideration in Republican-controlled state legislatures put universities and academic freedom in their crosshairs. Right-wing attacks on academic freedom will surely be taken up with new fervor after Donald Trump’s triumphant return to the Oval Office and the broad consolidation of Republican power at the federal level.

The Left displays equally little respect for academic freedom and intellectual heterodoxy. Its attacks on academic freedom started with mandated trigger warnings on syllabi and in classrooms, the identification of supposed microaggressions in everyday discourse, and a vast project to reshape ordinary language. As faculty eventually began to rebel against the over-policing of speech, the Left replaced it with another, more expressly political project: declaring Zionism and the State of Israel beyond the pale. Campus groups devoted to a diverse array of projects ranging from climate change to reproductive rights to gender equality reject student allies and partners who have the temerity to acknowledge that they are also Zionists. Liberal arts departments across the country issue official statements not only condemning Israeli military operations in Gaza, but declaring Israel itself a “settler-colonial project” — and silencing potential dissidents.

Some fields see the boycott of Israeli universities as essential to their identity as scholar-activists, even though such a boycott will surely undermine the free exchange of ideas and research across international borders.

In this time of political polarization, academic freedom has become an opportune target for activists from opposite ends of the spectrum. It is an unwieldy inconvenience standing in the way of unquestionable political convictions. One would be hard-pressed to think of an earlier moment in American history when competing political movements reached such consensus. The McCarthyite witch hunt in the early 1950s cost some faculty members their jobs and silenced many others, in part because those in the center kept silent, hoping to weather the storm. If the center remains silent once again, academic freedom as a universal principle may not survive. It will be invoked and contested as the occasion and political interest seem to demand.

The AAUP's new policy on boycotts is a strange response to the challenges of the moment. Yet it is as expected as it is dismaying. In response to this renewed assault on academic freedom, the AAUP has not donned its familiar armor and launched itself into battle in defense of the principle. Rather than resist the politicization of the academy, it has capitulated. Rather than refuse to play politics with academic freedom, it has leapt into the fray. The new policy implicitly concedes that academic freedom is a political bludgeon to be wielded when helpful and abandoned when inconvenient. It is what happens in an age when partisan politics is everything.

### *Why the AAUP Matters — and Why Resistance Is Critical*

We must not dismiss the AAUP's new policy on academic boycotts as the disturbing declaration of an irrelevant organization. True, the

national AAUP is not nearly as large as it once was. In its heyday, in 1969, it had at least 90,000 members, compared with just 44,000 today—under 3 percent of instructional faculty in U.S. institutions of higher education.

Still, the AAUP is the closest thing higher-education faculty have to a national organization. When people want to know what college and university faculty think, they turn to it because there is no alternative with comparable reach. And while Heterodox Academy and the Academic Freedom Alliance are growing, they cannot boast anything close to the AAUP's more than 500 campus chapters nationwide, the largest and most influential of which are faculty unions. The leaders of those chapters believe, or at least profess, themselves to represent faculty on their campuses, whether those faculty are AAUP members or not. It is still—or rather, until now it has been—the leading arbiter of professional professorial norms.

The new AAUP position on academic boycotts aims to reconfigure these norms. When scholars after 2006 occasionally pressed for a boycott of their fellow academics, they were compelled to explain why they urged an exception to the AAUP rule in this particular case. Critics could then take the norm-breakers to task for the logic of the exception they sought to carve out.

Now, however, the AAUP sees academic boycotts as “legitimate tactical responses” to produce the political change necessary for “the freedom to produce and exchange knowledge.” The AAUP claims to be agnostic about the wisdom of pressing for an academic boycott in any given case, but its defenders are wrong to depict the new stance as neutral. By legitimizing and normalizing boycotts, the AAUP is paving the way for *more* systematic boycotts of institutions of higher education, not fewer. The AAUP cannot be neutral with respect to academic boycotts if its policy is now effectively: *Boycott fellow scholars as you see fit, as your conscience dictates, and as your political acumen advises.*



Some colleagues have told us that they don't understand the fuss, that they find the new stance "measured." They agree with the AAUP that members of the faculty have the right to participate in boycotts of any kind if they so choose and that faculty should not be disciplined for supporting or opposing academic boycotts. So do we. But this misses the point. If the AAUP carries the day, systematic and collective academic boycotts would become the new normal. They would not be exceptions to a normative proscription that had to be explained according to some publicly acceptable rationale. At most, to persuade colleagues to participate, the boycotters might wish to explain why they thought the timing propitious or the boycott likely to be effective. But the new AAUP stance does not declare boycotts ethically problematic in the slightest. They are merely at times tactically inadvisable.

Normalizing academic boycotts is not "measured." It is a radical revolution that would, if successful, fundamentally reshape the academy. No one can compel faculty to work with colleagues whose behavior they find objectionable and, at the extreme, whose views they find offensive. But that is a boycott of an academic, not an academic boycott. If systematic academic boycotts of countries' faculty and institutions of higher education—either because those institutions' policies are objectionable or because the nation's policies are objectionable—become frequent, the core values and practices underpinning the world of scholarship will have been eviscerated. This would be a disaster for the American academy and—because of the AAUP's historical standing as a global norm-setter—for scholarly exchange worldwide.

The AAUP's previous governing view that academic boycotts are fundamentally at odds with the basic values of the academy was the correct one. The advance of scholarship depends on the free and unfettered exchange of ideas. Conference presentations must

be invited, speaking invitations extended, and articles published because of the substantive contribution of the scholarship, not the extramural views of the scholar, not her race, ethnicity, nationality, religion, or gender, not the place where she resides, or the location of her employment. Limits on scholarly exchange for any of these reasons — and many more — harm scholarship.

### *Saving Academic Freedom — for Us All*

The AAUP taught us all how essential academic freedom is to producing, disseminating, and teaching knowledge. How ironic that in 2024 it has endorsed the legitimacy of academic boycotts, which curb research collaboration across borders, shutter study-abroad programs, and circumscribe the exchange of ideas — tactics that it once rightly understood to be a menace to the scholarly enterprise. How paradoxical that the exercise of academic freedom, according to its once staunchest defender, now includes erasing the academic freedom of others. How absurd that the AAUP's vision of academic freedom now embraces an ethic that ascribes value to scholarship in significant measure based on the identity, and perhaps the presumed opinions, of the scholar themselves.

We understand why colleagues at the AAUP would be tempted to boycott fellow academics. They wish to advance their preferred vision of a good society, and they want to use whatever means they have at their disposal to the ends they deem virtuous. Academics usually have limited concrete means at their disposal to shape politics. One important exception: They can exercise power over fellow academics through their everyday scholarly activities, and their departmental and professional associations and collaborations.

In embracing academic boycotts, our colleagues at the AAUP for-

get the most consequential way they can effect change: through the power of their research. Scholarship normally and properly involves *persuading* (fellow scholarly) audiences that one's claims or findings are, for some reason, superior. We are not naïve. We know that coercion exists in the world of scholarship. But scholars rightly deride coercive scholarly actors as “gatekeepers” who use their position and prestige to prevent others from securing needed grants and publishing contracts. Coercion is what scholars, like other people, do when persuasion fails, when they are not able to win an argument fair and square.

The AAUP has lost sight of the academy's purpose. Boycotts threaten its very foundation. They cannot be normalized. The AAUP's new stance is not just wrong-headed. It is an outrage. \*