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Non-academic activity doesn't belong in Israel's ivory towers

When professors invite to a conference a speaker who praises the academic boycott of Israel – it is a disgrace.

By Ariel Rubinstein | Jan. 14, 2014 | 1:42 PM | 3

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I was invited to speak at a conference held the first week of January at Tel Aviv University, ostensibly devoted to the subject of knowledge and academic freedom. I didn't quite know how to interpret the title of my session – "Fragile Autonomies: An Internal Wound or Cultural Crisis?" – but it was easy to see that the conference was organized by lecturers who are proud of their struggle against "the Zionist project," and consider research institutes a legitimate base for action.

My political views are labeled leftist, and I'm aware that some things I say will be misused by others. But I feel obliged to discuss my experiences at the event precisely because of my views, and precisely because I have come out previously against other nonacademic activity that took place within the realm of academia.

It's fascinating to see just how similar the thought processes are among the extremes on both the right and the left. The conference organizers sought to fuel a sense of imminent doom. Words like "crisis," "persecution" and "ban" were bandied about just as easily as they would be by members of the "hilltop youth." The title of the conference was: "Knowledge in this Era: Historical Perspectives, Contemporary Challenges and the Future of Higher Education." The phrase "in this era" called to mind the verse from the Book of Esther when Mordechai dispatches Esther to the king on a mission of salvation, telling her, "for if you remain silent at this time ..." I wondered about the current usage of this Hebrew phrase. A Google search first brought up a lecture by (far-right rabbi) Dov Lior, entitled "Our Mission at This Time," in light of what was called "the constant threat of terrorists and anti-Semitism that is gaining momentum in the lands of the goyim." What came up third were the alarmist writings of "A Man from Binyamin," who is worried about the peace negotiations and proclaimed, "At this time ... the Jewish people is moving [from words] to actions!"

In between appeared the announcement for the conference, which began as follows: "Recently a series of events and processes ... have been mounting up into what appears to be a crisis in Israeli academia: from widespread budget cuts to a weakening of the authority of the Council for Higher Education (the process of establishing the university in Ariel is a paradigmatic example)." A paradigmatic example of what? Of the weakening of the CHE's authority, it would seem. But just a few sentences later, the text criticizes that body for overreaching in terms of its authority, complaining of "government interference in academic affairs, including attempts to shut down entire departments or to have faculty members dismissed." So does the CHE have too much or too little authority?

To my understanding, the Ariel University Center is an important part of the settlement enterprise and, as such, its establishment is a paradigmatic example not of the situation in local academia, but rather of the settlement apparatus, which buttresses its activity through the use of institutions like the Supreme Court, planning and building committees, and the education system. The establishment of a "university" in Ariel has practically nothing to do with any harm that's being done to the system of higher education in general. The authors of the online declaration link the two because they are captive to the "corrupting occupation" paradigm, which doesn't always apply.

The occupation is bad because it's an occupation; settlement is bad because it uproots another people from its homeland and the Jewish people from its moral core. The occupation is not bad because it leads to economic ruin (perhaps the opposite is true); the occupation is not bad because the money is going to the settlements instead of certain neighborhoods (it wouldn't necessarily have gone to the neighborhoods anyway); nor is it bad because it makes Israeli society less democratic (indeed, in many ways, the Israel of 2014 is more democratic than the Israel of 1964). But none of that can be reconciled with the conference organizers' apocalyptic world-view.

And why involve governments in academic conferences? The poster for the recent conference was emblazoned with the logo of the Embassy of the Federal Republic of Germany in Israel, which was listed as a partner. For goodness sake: What is the German government doing as a partner in a controversial academic conference in Israel? If it's okay for the German government, then why can't the Israeli government be a partner in a conference on "Judea and Samaria Studies"? Another partner in the conference was the Heinrich Boll Foundation, which is proudly aligned with the German Green Party. If a German political party is a legitimate partner, why can't an archaeology department join forces with the City of David (Ir David) Foundation? And why shouldn't a genetics department accept right-wing millionaires as partners in the quest for the Jewish gene? Needless to say, I find all such partnerships deplorable. I am against the bill that limits funding to certain nongovernment organizations because of the intention of its legislators, but I do not believe that foreign political elements have any place in Israeli politics. They certainly have no place in Israeli academia.

Limor Livnat and Avigdor Lieberman may want to interfere in academia, but the fact is that they do not. Who is making a joke out of academic freedom? The crudest political act I've ever encountered in my 40 years in academia occurred a few years ago in the same auditorium where last week's conference was held. Then, a conference had also been organized at TAU, by the Cohn Institute for the History and Philosophy of Science and Ideas. One speaker, a member of an organization supporting the academic boycott of Israel, regaled the audience with an exhaustive recounting of the organization's correspondence. At the end, a student in the audience complained that the lecture hadn't been practical enough, since the speaker did not give instructions on how to be contact with the group.

One of the organizers of the recent TAU conference candidly admitted that he sometimes deliberately exploits the academic platform. Others stubbornly insisted that there is no such thing as a nonpolitical academic debate, and that the very location of both TAU and the Hebrew University of Jerusalem on the ruins of Arab villages excludes any possibility of conducting a nonpolitical discussion there. I recognize the difficulty that the humanities and social sciences have in distinguishing the academic from the nonacademic. But a blurring of the boundaries should not blur something that is clear.

When a featured speaker repeats the phrase "the Zionist separation entity" dozens of times in a 30-minute talk, he has departed from the realm of academia. When professors invite to a conference a speaker who praises the academic boycott of Israel – it is a disgrace. When a conference speaker tries to confer upon himself and his cohorts the title of "dissident," a term that should be reserved for someone who has sacrificed himself in the struggle against a tyrannical regime – it is pathetic whining.

The muddling of academia with that which is not part of academia is not unique to people fighting against "the Zionist regime." For example, TAU's Steinmetz Center for Peace Research chose the German Green Party as a partner in marking "Twenty Years Since the Oslo Accords." For its part, sometimes with the university, the Citizens' Empowerment Center in Israel actively promotes plans to change the country's system of government, such as raising the vote threshold for the Knesset to 4 percent. As part of these activities, professors seem to reach out to politicians more than politicians are trying to stick their hands into academia. But when lecturers uses the halls of academia to promote an ideological agenda, students ought to be outraged, and we shouldn't be surprised if the taxpaying public is tempted to intervene.

Israeli society has given professors an incredible privilege. It allows us to devote our lives to research even when there is no material gain to be had, and to teach whatever we wish to teach, and all at the public's expense. I am opposed to Israeli government policy in many areas. But I appreciate the fact that, at the end of the day, all of the country's governments have done an outstanding job of preserving academic freedom in Israel. I feel an obligation to offer thanks to this society morning, noon and night for this privilege that has been given to me.

There are some who would complain about fragility, and end up shattering the glass.