July 26, 2019

To members of the Society for the Study of Social Problems (SSSP):

As SSSP award winners, former SSSP officers, and former editors of the society’s journal Social Problems, we are deeply committed to the SSSP’s stated purposes, which include fostering “cooperative relations among persons and organizations engaged in the application of scientific sociological findings to the formulation of social policies” (SSSP By-Laws, art. 2, sec. 1). As the SSSP’s mission statement points out: “Fulfilling this purpose requires both a strict adherence to the highest principles of academic freedom, freedom of speech, and due process, as stated in the AAUP’s 1940 statement on academic freedom and tenure and 2014 statement on academic freedom and electronic communications; and the protection of the right to engage in intellectual debates of all types without fear of censorship or retaliation.” We note that the American Association of University Professors (AAUP), in accordance with these principles, opposes academic boycotts. In May 2013, AAUP reaffirmed this position in a Statement on Academic Boycotts saying, “In view of the association’s longstanding commitment to the free exchange of ideas, we oppose academic boycotts. On the same grounds, we recommend that other academic associations oppose academic boycotts. We urge that they seek alternative means, less inimical to the principle of academic freedom, to pursue their concerns.”

Given these commitments, we are deeply troubled by the “Resolution on BDS” (Resolution 4), proposed by Melissa Weiner and Johnny E. Williams for the SSSP’s 2019 annual meeting, which would commit the SSSP to a boycott of Israeli academic institutions. The proposed resolution obliges SSSP members to “refrain from participation in any form of academic and cultural cooperation, collaboration or joint projects” with Israeli institutions, and to pressure their own institutions “to suspend all ties with Israeli universities, including collaborative projects, study abroad, funding and exchanges.”

Collectively, we, the undersigned, represent a wide range of views on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and how it should be resolved. While we can and should vigorously discuss these differences, there is one issue on which we all agree: We oppose all academic boycotts, including the proposal for an SSSP-imposed boycott against Israeli academic institutions.

We believe it is discriminatory to single out Israeli scholars and universities for an academic boycott; that boycotts of academic institutions cannot be meaningfully separated from the individuals whom those institutions employ and whom such boycotts inevitably harm; that a boycott of Israeli academic institutions is therefore more accurately described as a blacklist; and that individual scholars should not be punished on the basis of their nationality, political views, or the policies of their employers or governments. If adopted, the proposed “Resolution on BDS” would set a dangerous precedent by sponsoring an inequitable and discriminatory policy—in violation of the SSSP’s mission statement—that would punish one nation’s universities and scholars. Scholars must be free to pursue ideas without being targeted for repression, discipline, or institutional censorship. The adoption of an academic boycott against Israel and Israelis
would do violence to this bedrock principle. Among other things, it would exclude Israeli colleagues from equal membership in the SSSP (and perhaps from membership altogether) in violation of the SSSP’s own by-laws (art 3., sec. 1). Scholars would be punished not because of what they believe—which would be bad enough—but simply because of who they are based on their nationality. **In no other context does the SSSP discriminate on the basis of national origin—and for good reason.** This is discrimination pure and simple. It also diminishes the pursuit of knowledge, by discarding knowledge because it is produced by a certain group of people.

Furthermore, a blacklist of Israeli academic institutions harms all SSSP members by restricting their academic freedom to work with scholars from other institutions around the world. Such freedom is essential to SSSP members’ vital professional interest in academic freedom and open intellectual exchange. Without such freedom, researchers and educators cannot fulfill their professional responsibilities. The SSSP should not set policies that would restrict members’ academic right to conduct research and collaborate with colleagues as they see fit.

Finally, academic boycotts are not only anathema to academic freedom; they also undercut the important role of academics as thought leaders in both criticizing and evaluating government policies. An academic boycott collectively punishes every Israeli (Muslim, Christian, Druze, Jewish, and atheist) regardless of their political views, including those Israeli academics who are instrumental thought leaders in the movement for a just peace. In 2006, Sari Nusseibeh, President of Al Quds University, the Arab university in Jerusalem, publicly condemned academic boycotts, telling *The Associated Press*, “If we are to look at Israeli society, it is within the academic community that we’ve had the most progressive pro-peace views and views that have come out in favor of seeing us as equals. If you want to punish any sector, this is the last one to approach.”

Healthy, constructive debate on the Middle East and other complex topics is most welcome within the SSSP and the academy. We believe the SSSP should encourage its members to address these issues freely, including with Israeli colleagues within and outside of the SSSP. Squelching dialogue and cultural exchange through a boycott is not a constructive means to advance political ends, however commendable those ends may be.

Peace for both Israelis and Palestinians depends on both parties working together towards a negotiated, mutually agreeable solution. In contrast, an academic boycott is divisive and undermines this objective. We must instead encourage constructive efforts to bring Israeli and Palestinian academics together on joint projects, including those that foster reconciliation and promote understanding and trust—all critical factors that will enable Israelis and Palestinians to coexist in peace and mutual security. The call for an academic boycott of Israel is a destructive attempt not only to silence, but also punish those involved in this important and potentially transformative academic work.

We urge all SSSP members, regardless of their views about Israel or the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, to reaffirm the SSSP’s commitment to academic freedom and open intellectual exchange. To deny these freedoms to one group of scholars on the grounds that others are deprived of them is logically inconsistent and morally indefensible. We
believe these fundamental principles must be upheld for scholars of every nationality, at every academic institution, everywhere in the world.

Sincerely,

Isaac D. Balbus, Professor of Political Science (Emeritus), University of Illinois at Chicago

Steven E. Barkan, Professor of Sociology, University of Maine

Joel Best, Professor of Sociology & Criminal Justice, University of Delaware

Peter Conrad, Harry Coplan Professor of Social Sciences (Emeritus), Brandeis University

Steven Epstein, Professor of Sociology and John C. Shaffer Professor in the Humanities, Northwestern University

Chad Alan Goldberg, Professor of Sociology, University of Wisconsin–Madison

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