

BDS in the Neo-Liberal University

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One of the sustaining myths of the neoliberal university today is that progress - be it in the arts, science, or political thought - is the purview of the researchers who populate its conference rooms and laboratories, its listings of higher academic staff. In fact, true political and cultural innovation often has less to do with expert opinion than with the educating influence of a crowd enraged, or more broadly with the forms of solidarity, protest and mutual understanding capable of uniting new majorities to a common cause. Real progress, in other words, is unpatented, has little or nothing to do with academic tenure, and, crucially, belongs to us all. Even in areas of life-saving scientific research - which often rely on public funding to advance in the first place - progress may arguably be measured more by the uses to which such research is put (e.g. for-profit vs for the general welfare) rather than by the development of this research as such.

But if education and self-emancipation are projects that thrive well - and perhaps even thrive best - beyond the bounds of our higher educational institutions, universities nonetheless can serve to clarify in microcosm the interests, ideology and institutional investments (quite literally) of the political elite, as well as the kinds of resistance with which this elite may be countered and exposed. This is true across a range of issues - from workers' rights to student fees to college-wide mental health - each one offering a kind of snapshot of how the establishment exerts, maintains and frames its power in an institutional setting. To this end, however, the comments below adopt Palestine solidarity and the academic boycott of Israel as their principal point of focus, taking Trinity College Dublin (TCD) as their case in point.

The reasons for this focus are twofold. Firstly, because the Palestinian cause is one

which touches the pulse of almost every aspect of our life in common - from education to civil rights to internationalism and trade - and so should be discussed on that basis. And secondly, for the reasons suggested above: because by supporting (in this instance, in our universities) the self-emancipation of the Palestinian people from Israeli apartheid, occupation and ethnic cleansing, we quickly discover something of how the neoliberal order asserts its interests and maintains its strength politically. In this sense, the solidarity project of achieving freedom, equality and a just peace for Palestine is one that contains within it the seeds of our collective emancipation from inequality in general - and the forms of exploitation and complicity which sustain it.

For the purposes of this article, neoliberalism can be broadly understood as the privatisation of basic rights, natural resources and public services - usually in the name of efficiency, and very often accompanied by some sort of claim to the trust of the people who end up paying the price of the reckless drive for profits that it encourages. As a general project, neoliberalism thus mixes violent exploitation with stylish self-publicity. Neoliberal economics may result in deepening inequality and climate chaos, neoliberal politics may result in self-righteous wars and state-wide corruption, but as a project neoliberalism is always presented (in the media and by its own architects) as the safer, sleeker and more appealing option of top-down political programmes. This last aspect, of course, only sharpens how morally ruthless and politically degraded the neoliberal worldview really is.

For this writer, something of this combination of elements came starkly into view three years ago, and specifically in relation to TCD's connection to Israel and Palestine. The immediate catalyst was when,

shortly after Israel's five-week military bombardment of the Gaza strip came to an end in August, 2014, the Global Relations Office in TCD shared a short article written by a student from that Palestinian city, who had arrived in Ireland to take up his PhD in the college. The article provided a vivid personal account of the effects of the Israeli siege and the various trials which students and civilians face on a daily basis - an account made all the more resonant by the reports of devastation in Gaza that had recently filled the media and news feeds of Irish readers. In this context, the article also described Trinity as being 'a great dream' to visit and 'one of the leading and most prestigious universities in the world' for students to study in. The Global Relations Office published the article on its blog with a series of generic tags, including 'Dublin', 'International', 'Study', and then publicised the article on Facebook with the comment: 'Deeply inspiring words of [the PhD student] who travelled from Gaza to study here in Trinity. Read about his journey and his first impressions of Dublin and Trinity College Dublin.' Despite the harrowing, heartfelt content of the article as a whole, the 'pitch' of TCD's Global Relations Office seemed clear: to all international and postgraduate students (two groups ordinarily required to pay higher fees than domestic applicants), come and study in TCD, one of the world's foremost universities. The psychological and material implications of Israeli occupation and apartheid were, it seemed, fair game for making this last point clear.

The article in question was of course both moving and urgent; but its appropriation by the Global Relations Office seemed poorly managed at best, grossly cynical at worst. If the episode said a great deal about the message TCD was trying to project to the world, in any case, it also pointed to a now glaring hypocrisy at the heart of TCD's academic life and self-image as an institution: namely, its apparent awareness of the systematic crimes to which life (and edu-

cational life) in Palestine is subjected, and its simultaneous complicity, by way of research and funding partnerships, in Israeli apartheid.

The point is perhaps worth concretising. In the academic year 2013-14 (i.e. in the months before Israel's so-called 'Operation Protective Edge' against Gaza, and indeed before TCD's Global Relations Office drew attention to the effects of that military assault for publicity purposes), TCD's research partners in Israel included: drone manufacturer Elbit Security Systems, the Israeli Security and Counter-Terrorism Academy, and the Weizmann Institute of Science. All of these, of course, either have ties to Israel's military sector or receive funding from the Israeli State - thus qualifying as legitimate institutional targets of the Palestinian call for boycott and divestment measures against Israel, which has been endorsed by universities such as SOAS as well as a number of student unions, including the UK's largest in the University of Manchester.

Since 2014, the apparent priorities of the TCD authorities have become even more transparent. Following student efforts on campus to highlight and protest TCD's research links with Israel, a report commissioned by the college Board in 2015 found that the university had academic relationships with eleven research institutions in that country, including Ariel University, the Hebrew University of Jerusalem and Ben Gurion University of the Negev - all notorious for their connections to Israel's occupation and military sector. While such an announcement would have been alarming for anyone with even a peripheral awareness of the Palestinian BDS Movement, however, TCD's Provost visited Israel later that year and formally committed to 'deepening the collaboration' between TCD and these institutions. After the Provost signed a memorandum to that effect, in June 2016 TCD received an EU funded grant of €76,328 'to allow for the exchange of staff and students. . .

over the next two years’.

The point, of course, is that doing academic business with Israel has proven to be a profitable enterprise for TCD in terms of both finance and research. Moreover, the TCD authorities have announced their active commitment to sustaining this enterprise, at the expense of the human rights and legitimate demands of Palestinian civil society groups. In this sense, the case of TCD may be emblematic of the research patterns, the material interests, and, again, the neoliberal ideology dominating university life across Europe and the UK more generally.

What makes this all the more the case, however, and what makes TCD’s relationship to Israel and Palestine so distinctive, is the fact of its own institutional history of boycott and anti-apartheid action - a history, indeed, which the TCD authorities and internal institutions have also been glad to advertise in recent years. In December, 2013, for example, the Provost paid tribute to the founder of the Irish Anti-Apartheid Movement, TCD Law Professor Kader Asmal, and recalled his own involvement in the solidarity marches on campus and around Dublin in the 1980s in the following terms:

You could not have been a Trinity student in the 1980s without being aware of Kader Asmal and of Nelson Mandela’s imprisonment on Robben Island. I recall being on many the march chanting ‘Mandela will be free!’... To have taken part in those marches with Kader was to feel part of something great and something global – we knew that similar marches were happening all over the world. And to see Mandela released and a regime change in South Africa was the triumph of hope.

In the same year, similarly, the TCD Students’ Union (TCDSU) renamed its office building ‘Mandela House’, in tribute not just to Nelson Mandela himself, but to the many academics and students who campaigned for the boycott of South Africa on an anti-apartheid and solidarity-centred basis during his imprisonment. One of the most

prominent figures of that particular movement on campus at the time, of course, was Mary Robinson - later UN Commissioner for Human Rights, and currently the Chancellor of TCD.

Which brings us back to Palestine. And specifically: to the decision by the TCD authorities not only to ignore Palestinian civil society’s call for the boycott of Israel on human rights grounds, but to actively pursue lucrative economic and academic ties with Israeli institutions. As is the trend with most neoliberal policies, in one form or another, there is of course a palpable irony in the fact that this practice is extended and justified in the name of such principles as academic freedom, while week after week fresh reports emerge of the many degradations and oppressions inflicted on Palestinian life by Israel. In the logic of today’s neoliberal policy-makers, it seems, academic freedom now primarily refers to the supposed right of universities to collaborate with apartheid regimes such as Israel’s in the name of profit and academic prestige. Of the range of freedoms to which the Palestinian people legitimately lay claim, however, and which are violently and systematically denied to them by Israel and its allies, no mention is made.

Attempting to counter this trend, of course, and building on the efforts of other pro-BDS student groups in recent years, since September 2016 there has been a vibrant and growing Palestine solidarity movement on campus in TCD - under the banner of the Students for Justice in Palestine campaign (of which this writer is a member). As with similar campaigns in other universities, the SJP group has tried to combine activist and educational approaches to lobby for a college-wide boycott of Israel and to show active solidarity with the Palestinian cause. Thus, over the course of the last academic year, our petition addressed to Mary Robinson garnered over 2,000 signatures, we organised discussions with members of the dynamic Irish grouping Academics for Pales-

tine, we arranged a Palestine Action Week on campus, and hosted the prominent and inspiring BDS activist Malaka Mohammed for talks in TCD and other Irish universities. In addition to which, we apparently caused something of a sensation by staging a non-violent protest against a talk to be given by the Israeli Ambassador on campus (a talk which included security and passport checks on students at the door by Israeli embassy officials). Finally, we put forward a motion to the TCDSU Council to lobby for the boycott of Israel and affiliate with the BDS Movement, among other measures. These last actions have perhaps done the most both to expose the priority which TCD today accords to research funding (and the somewhat nebulous academic freedom of doing business with terror states), over and above a basic respect for human rights and anti-apartheid solidarity.

Following SJP's protest against the Israeli Ambassador's talk on campus - which took the form of a picket-line outside the event venue, through which students and security staff were easily able to pass for the duration - a college disciplinary committee issued a fine to one of the student organisers of that direct action, under the charge of 'frustrating the purpose of holding a previously authorised college event', and this in spite of the fact that the college statutes explicitly recognise 'the legitimate right of students to assemble and express grievances'. These proceedings came in the wake of comments from the Provost describing the SJP campaign as the 'antithesis of what Trinity stands for', as well as a public statement from the Israeli embassy encouraging the 'esteemed university' to 'deal with the instigators of last night's protest'. Amid all of which, no apparent attempt was made by those same authorities to address the issue of TCD's extensive and lucrative ties with the State of Israel and its affiliated institutions - an issue which our petition of over 2000 signatures explicitly highlights. It's worth noting further, indeed, that the arranged de-

livery of this petition - addressed to Mary Robinson, but to be received by the Provost on her behalf - was suspended indefinitely by the college authorities.

In a similar vein, there was an unusual and arguably telling unanimity at the TCDSU Council in March, when all the current SU sabbatical officers chose to speak against our motion - in some cases after having indicated to SJP members that they would abstain from comment on the issue. Controversially, among the speakers who opposed the pro-BDS motion on the night was incoming Student Union President, Kevin Keane, who during his candidacy for that role had committed his support to the SJP campaign, pledging 'to advocate [for] the full academic and economic boycott of Israel'. The pro-BDS motion was defeated by a majority vote by the TCDSU Council; nonetheless, it has sparked a vigorous debate among students on campus around issues of activism, student politics, and of course the political integrity of prominent SU figures. In the wake of the Council vote, news emerged that the Israeli embassy had written to the SU President, pressurising him to suppress the BDS motion.

Acknowledging these developments, and considering also what appears to be an attempted crackdown on BDS activism and generally pro-Palestinian activities on campuses across the UK in particular, we can no doubt reach a number of conclusions. One, of course, is that the general campaign for full institutional solidarity with Palestine in our universities can be, and perhaps can only be, an uphill struggle - given the integral role that international economic and academic partnerships play in the neoliberal university today, and also in light of the considerable bureaucratic structures available to college authorities to quell legitimate and effective student activism, if necessary. In this latter sense, indeed, the challenges faced by pro-BDS activists on campus are perhaps indicative of the obstacles facing (and also, the very importance of) student activism in gen-

eral, particularly as such seeks to change and challenge the status quo, rather than slotting smoothly into place within it.

Another implication, of course, is that BDS campaigns and the issues they seek to highlight cannot simply be brushed aside by either the college authorities, or for that matter by Israel, its representatives and apologists - despite, very often, the best efforts of these. The more intense it becomes, the more the institutional resistance to BDS serves to expose the glaring and exploitative double standards of TCD's institutional approach to apartheid crimes - which swings from a now-venerated stance of full, formal condemnation (in the 1970s and 1980s) to a profit-hungry willingness to whitewash and collaborate, in the name of academic freedom and exchange.

Once again, the concrete lesson to be learned from this is that to oppose and change the neoliberal university on this one issue is also to threaten the very idea of the neoliberal university as a legitimate project. Indeed even by making so straightforward a demand that human rights, solidarity and

apartheid-free research standards come before short-term monetary gain, student activists threaten both the ideological and the material foundations on which neoliberal educational policies are built. As such, and taking heart from innumerable other campaigns around the country (from Kinvara to Queens University Belfast) we find ourselves more committed than ever to effecting an end to all research ties between our university and Israel - and indeed to any institutional links that condone, contribute or lend academic credence to Israel's policies of systematic violence and discrimination against Palestinian communities. Having seen the ugly face of institutional repression and the blatant elevation of profits above human rights plainly, the challenge ahead is thus more urgent than ever: to expose the complicity of our university in crimes against humanity, and to demonstrate our full solidarity with the people of Palestine, whose dignity and resistance in the face of Israeli oppression remain our continuing inspiration.