



What is a cultural boycott?

Cultural boycotts are undertaken to express repugnance for the conduct of a country or its government. They often accompany economic boycotts, and may or may not extend to the academic sphere.¹

The term “cultural boycott” covers any or all of the following: consistent refusal to perform in the country being boycotted, to purchase its cultural products (e.g. CDs), to attend concerts by performers from the boycotted country, to display cultural artefacts from it, or to allow one’s own cultural products to be sold or displayed in the boycotted country. It can also include the following: discontinuation of academic exchanges; the exclusion of citizens of a boycotted country from public events hosted or funded by a government or by international bodies (e.g. the Olympics or sports federations); the denial of visas to artists or academics from a boycotted country; or politically-motivated disruption of performances and lectures of individuals from a boycotted country.

Are prominent artists or academics boycotting Israel?

Yes. In January 2009, following Israel’s assault on Gaza, 300 Canadian academics signed an open letter to Steven Harper condemning Israel’s War on Gaza and calling for sanctions against Israel.² The Ontario Division of the Canadian Union of Public Employees endorsed a full boycott of Israel. The *US Campaign for the Academic and Cultural Boycott of Israel*, also launched in January 2009, currently has 471 individual endorsers at American universities, as well as 131 endorsements from cultural workers.

Indian writer Arundhati Roy, British novelist John Berger, US poet Adrienne Rich, British film director Ken Loach, screenwriter Paul Laverty, Canadian author and activist Naomi Klein, and Canadian theologian/McGill academic Gregory Baum have all called for sanctions or a boycott of Israel. However, although Canadian writer Margaret Atwood has reportedly raised concerns about Israel’s conduct when visiting there, she describes cultural boycotts as “a form of censorship.”

A number of performing artists have cancelled their 2010 concerts in Israel: Gil Scott Heron, Santana, The Pixies, Gorillaz Sound System, the Klaxons, and most prominently, Elvis Costello. Elvis Costello announced in mid-May 2010 that he was cancelling two summer performances there, saying his decision was a “matter of instinct and conscience.”³ The Gorillaz Sound System and Klaxons announced on June 4, in the wake of Israel’s lethal raid on an aid flotilla, that they were cancelling their performances in Israel that week.⁴ The Pixies’ cancellation of their appearance was announced two days later.⁵

Despite the calls for cultural and academic boycotts, many notable critics of Israel, including Noam Chomsky and Naomi Klein, have continued visiting there. However, Chomsky refrained from scheduling his customary lectures at Israeli universities during a May 2010 visit to speak in the West Bank.⁶ Klein visited Israel, the West Bank and Gaza in the summer of 2009 when the Hebrew edition of her book *Shock Doctrine* was launched, but is donating her royalties from it to her local publisher, Andalus, which specializes in translating Arabic texts into Hebrew. She refused to cooperate with Israeli state institutions during her tour, has expressed support for a boycott and is working closely with Palestine’s Boycott National Committee (BNC).⁷

On March 18, 2010, the Senate of the Associated Students of the University of California (Berkeley) resolved to divest ASUC's assets from two American companies, General Electric and United Technologies, that are "materially and militarily supporting the Israeli government's occupation of the Palestinian territories," and to advocate that the University, with about \$135 million invested in companies that profit from Israel’s illegal actions in the Occupied Territories, follow suit. Although the ASUC Senate president vetoed the motion, the resolution may presage ASUC support for an academic boycott. Similar moves have occurred at Rutgers and the University of Arizona.

Have full-fledged cultural and academic boycotts been initiated?

For a cultural or academic boycott of Israel to genuinely have effect, the major organizations representing performing artists and academics in key countries have to endorse it. That is not yet the case with Israel, although support for a cultural boycott of Israel is on the upswing.

As of June 2010, none of the largest organizations of performing artists in the West —British Actors' Equity, or the British Musicians' Union, Canada's Alliance of Canadian Cinema, Television and Radio Artists (ACTRA), or the US's Screen Actors' Guild (SAG)—have endorsed a boycott of Israel. In late January 2006, the British Musicians' Union debated and rejected a motion to ban all Israeli musicians from Britain and visits of their own members to Israel. The Musicians' Union rejected the argument that Israel practices apartheid.⁸ There is currently nothing at their website referring to a boycott of Israel.

Likewise, few of the most representative organizations representing academics have so far voted in favour of an academic boycott. In January 2010 Education International (EI)—the global union federation representing more than 30 million teachers and education workers in 172 countries and territories—and the Canadian Association of University Teachers (CAUT), which represents 67,000 academics in Canada, released a joint report drawing attention to violations of basic academic freedoms and rights in Israel and the occupied Palestinian territories.⁹ The report defended individual Palestinian and Israeli academics' right to call for a boycott without being subjected to retaliation by their academic institutions or governments, but EI and CAUT did not urge educational institutions, academics or their own component member organizations to engage in an academic boycott of Israel. However, CAUT did issue a statement in January 2009 sharply criticizing Israel's assault on Gaza, calling it "disproportionate to the threat it faces." EI also issued a statement in June 2010 condemning Israel's flotilla raid.¹⁰

Nevertheless, support for an academic boycott may be increasing. On May 31, 2010, the Universities and Colleges Union, representing approximately 120,000 teachers and other staff at UK universities and colleges, endorsed motions to do with boycott, divestment and sanctions. However, none was specifically on an academic boycott.

Have there been cultural boycotts against countries other than Israel?

A cultural boycott of South Africa began in 1961 when the British Musicians' Union adopted a policy that its members would not perform in South Africa as long as apartheid was in effect. The boycott slowly gained support in both North America and Europe, although the US lagged well behind the UK in its willingness to forego sales of its own products in South Africa. In 1981, unions representing 240,000 actors across the US took a unanimous decision that their members should not perform in South Africa. South Africa was also excluded from the Olympics until 1992, as well as from international rugby and cricket tournaments. South African apartheid was dismantled only 30 years after the application of the first boycotts.

Chilean grapes and wine were boycotted during the Pinochet dictatorship, but there was no cultural boycott; instead, solidarity groups worked hard to break the isolation of progressive Chilean academics and artists.¹¹

¹ Supporters of a cultural and/or economic boycott sometimes oppose academic boycotts, because they judge that the benefit of exchanges with academics from the boycotted country — especially those who are critical of the boycotted state's government — outweigh the risk of potential legitimization of the boycotted state.

² "Academics urge Canadian Sanctions against Israel," Canadian Union of Public Employees, Ontario Division, January 2009.

³ For more information see CJPME press release *Costello's cancellation of Israel concerts sets example*, May 31, 2010.

⁴ City Mouse Online. "Klaxons and Gorillaz Sound System cancel Israel shows, apparently due to Gaza flotilla raid," June 4, 2010.

⁵ For more information see CJPME press release "Pixies boycott Israel, cancel concert," June 14, 2010.

⁶ For more information see CJPME press release "Israel blocks Noam Chomsky's entry into the West Bank," May 18, 2010.

⁷ "Naomi Klein in Bil'in: Boycott Israel." Website bilin-willage.org, June 26, 2009.

⁸ "British Musicians Union votes against proposed boycott against Israel," Sing Out! Corporation. June 2003. (Obtained from *HighBeam Research*, June 22, 2010.)

⁹ Robinson, David. "The Status of Higher Education Teaching Personnel in Israel, the West Bank and Gaza," Education International and Canadian Association of University Teachers, January 2010.

¹⁰ "EI urges inquiry into Gaza aid ship attack," Education International, June 1, 2010.

¹¹ Simalchik, Joan (former president of Toronto Action for Chile). Conversation, June 22, 2010.