

A comment on Keith Hammond, “*Universities in opposition to Israel’s military occupation and the de-development of the West Bank and Gaza*”

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This is a passionate article, a *cri de coeur*, a deeply-felt contribution to (in Paulo Freire’s phrase) “a pedagogy of indignation.” Keith Hammond has worked in Gaza for several years; and out of his experience there, one of the most wretched places of the earth, comes the passion and indignation with which this article coruscates.

The article challenges universities and those of us who work in them to boycott the Israeli institutions which sustain and condone the occupation of the West Bank and the blockade of Gaza, and what he calls the economic and social “de-development” of Palestine. The word “must” he repeats a number of times: academics and students “must ... convey to Israel that the current situation is totally unacceptable”; this “must be done if there is to be an end to conflict and violence”; the years of international indifference “must now end and opposition to Israel’s apartheid system be built on campuses everywhere”; “Israel’s refusal to comply with international law must be opposed first and foremost in places of higher education.” Not could, not even should, but must!

I entirely agree that institutions of higher education have a particular responsibility in opposing the illegal occupation; and there are many signs that this is happening. However, his words “first and foremost” give me pause. I can see how his own role as an academic, together with his experience in Gaza, could have brought him to this conviction. But I am unable to accept the suggestion that other sectors—the media, religious institutions, health cadres, and, ultimately, governments acting together—do not also have important roles; and in the case of governments, arguably more important roles. As regards governments, he is scathing, and in my view rightly so, about “the shame of the British government and the rest of the international community” which since 1948 has given tacit support to ethnic cleansing, military occupation, a deliberate pattern of humiliation and dehumanization, and the other elements in Israel’s subjugation of Palestine and its people. Ultimately, however, recognizing (as he says himself) that “Israel will not end the occupation on its own,” it will only be, in my view, through the action of many governments leaning together on a paranoid and recalcitrant Israeli government, that the occupation will end. The program of boycott, divestment and sanctions (BDS) which he advocates will bring that day closer, but will not by itself end the occupation. Certainly the universities have a critically-important part to play in educating these governments; and I would welcome the formation of an international consortium or coalition of academic entities which would simultaneously work to advance the cause of justice for Palestine within academic communities, and would also systematically equip academics to press their own governments to act for a

comprehensive peace which would bring security to Israel and peace to the Middle East through the securing of justice for Palestine.

Among those governments, that of the United States must eventually take the lead. The signals from Washington, however, have been mixed. On the one hand, President Obama has advocated a two-state solution based on the pre-occupation borders of 1967; yet he has at the same time indicated that the U.S. will veto any U.N. motion which approves of Palestine being recognized as one state among others. These mixed signals alone cry out for concerted pedagogical attention to the many dimensions (political, economic, military, religious) of the largely negative role which the U.S. has played in its support of Israel since 1948.

The most convincing and practical section of his article, I find, is what he says about the effects of the presence in Palestine of international students, to which I would add the presence of non-student internationals. From a historical North American viewpoint, I would assert that the internationals have learned experientially how the Palestinian cause has a degree of moral claim on them equivalent in our present time to the moral claim which many of us in North America experienced during the time of the civil rights movement led by Martin Luther King. This is entirely congruent, of course, with the origins of his own passionate commitment, nourished as it has been by his experience with the people of Gaza. My own hope is that every academic who reads Hammond's article will consider how his or her institution might organize its own method of participation in this morally demanding movement.

Having just returned myself from a visit to Palestine and Israel, I have to demur, however, at the intensity of some of his statements. The maintenance of the institutions of education and health, he says, is "almost impossible"; and he asserts that schools and clinics built with international aid "last only as long as the next IDF [Israeli Defence Force] round of collective punishments." I acknowledge that these statements come from real passion and concern; but the Palestinian cause will be more truly served with sober description (not forgetting passion!) than with overstatement, even in a good cause. Educational and health institutions have a task which is perhaps impossible in a particular situation, but which in many instances is extremely difficult rather than impossible; and certainly the assault on Gaza in 2008-09 destroyed a number of schools and clinics; but many other Palestinian-run schools and clinics continue to do outstanding work—under very, very difficult (but not impossible) circumstances.

I salute Keith Hammond for his passion and his commitment, and for the clarity of his challenge to the academic community to work for justice in Palestine. I would also encourage him to look for ways in which the energy of the global academic community, not on its own, but working together with the energy of other social and political sectors, could/can/will—must! bring the need for the ending of the occupation beyond academic circles to the attention of the globe *tout entier*.