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Editorial

Academic openness, boycotts and journal policy

The first paper in this issue of *Political Geography*, titled “Understanding ‘ethnocratic’ regimes: The politics of seizing contested territories”, by Oren Yiftachel and As’ad Ghanem, has had a convoluted trip to publication. It has been the subject of intense debate, often based on incorrect information due to its featured status in an article by Andy Beckett in the *Guardian Newspaper* (London) on 12 December 2002. (The article about the academic boycott of Israeli institutions, and titled “It’s water on stone—in the end, the stone wears out”, can be accessed from <http://www.guardian.co.uk/g2/story/0,858314,00.html>.) In this editorial, I want to set the record straight and to certify that the publication of this paper was the result of the application of the usual peer-review process of the journal and that the publication decision was uninfluenced by the paper’s or authors’ reputations. I also want to state clearly the policy of the journal on paper submissions, now endorsed by the editorial board and the publishers, Elsevier Science.

The story of the paper’s journey to these pages is certainly a chequered one. In Spring 2002, Oren Yiftachel contacted me about his intended submission and I directed him to David Slater, the other editor who handles submissions from outside North America. The paper was submitted in April 2002 but was returned to the authors unopened by Professor Slater. The package was accompanied by a note that he would not submit the paper to review since he (Slater) had signed the letter urging an academic boycott against Israeli academics. In the *Guardian* story, Professor Slater is quoted as saying that, though he was familiar with Oren Yiftachel’s work, he “was not sure how critical he had been of Israel”. In a subsequent letter to the editorial board (21 January 2003), Professor Slater wrote he initially declined to consider the paper but decided that declining the article constituted an error of judgement and he later agreed to send the paper out to referees. Only a couple members of the editorial board (including me) were aware of these developments and we strongly urged Professor Slater to reconsider his pos-

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ition. It should be clear that this initial refusal to send the paper to review was a personal decision by an editor and was never accepted by the co-editor, the editorial board, or the publisher. The paper was then sent to three qualified referees.

In November 2002, the anonymous reviewer comments with a letter from David Slater were mailed to the authors indicating that if revisions were made to the paper, then it could be published in due course. The *Guardian* story reported erroneously that the paper had been accepted (a retraction of this statement was later published on 19 December 2002 after clarification from Oren Yiftachel). In October 2003, the paper was re-submitted to me (the preference of the authors) and I sent it again to the original three reviewers asking them to evaluate the revision and to see if their original criticisms had been addressed. After a couple more revisions based on further commentary from the reviewers and me, the paper was accepted for publication in early 2004.

The controversy surrounding the paper was not directed at its contents so much as the pros and cons of an academic boycott against a country and its educational institutions and personnel. The decision to send the paper for review was over-looked in the furore about the initial decision to return it without review. The context of the heated debate about the boycott, while important to understanding the media attention, became irrelevant as soon as the paper started on the usual path of review, revision and publication. The story appeared in one form or another in major outlets like the *Times* (London), the *Daily Telegraph*, *Sydney Morning Herald*, *Boston Globe*, *Jerusalem Post*, *Ha'aretz*, and the *Gulf Daily News*, and was the subject of television debates as well as a story on the BBC World Service. It was posted and re-posted on dozens of weblogs and list-serves from where many of the dozens of emails that I received (mostly accusatory and angry) emanated. Within Israel, the story received wide attention in the context of widespread anger about the boycott. What I have tried to emphasize in all communications from the beginning of the affair was that the initial personal action of one editor was not the policy of the journal and that the paper was undergoing the usual procedure of academic journals.

In response to the multiple messages that I received about the *Guardian* story, I wrote a statement about our editorial policy and sent it to all editorial board members in December 2002. It is reproduced below. All but two members endorsed this statement; the endorsers included Professor Slater in email correspondence to the board in January 2003. The board members who could not endorse the statement as written believed that it is too rigid and does not take account of all possible circumstances. My own position is guided by Statute 5 of the International Council of Scientific Unions that states that the organization “shall observe and actively uphold the principle of the universality of science. This principle entails freedom of association and expression, access to data and information, and freedom of communication and movement in connection with international scientific activities

without any discrimination on the basis of such factors as citizenship, religion, creed, political stance, ethnic origin, race, color, language, age or sex.”¹

Each of us has our own political preferences and each can make a personal decision about attending a conference, submitting to a journal, or collaborating with a colleague in another country. But a journal editor has to set aside these kinds of proclivities. Editors are often discontent with the methodologies of papers that pass their review procedures and frequently disagree with the arguments presented by authors. Of course, it is more likely that a “political” journal such as ours will publish works that raise hackles or cheers but the readers have to be assured that the papers in print have passed the usual review procedures. I don’t expect readers to agree with the choice of all of the papers that survive this process but they have to be assured that none was treated in an unfair manner, either favourably or unfavourably. As long as I am the editor, this shall be the case. Responses to this editorial are welcome.

Statement on the Ghanem/Yiftachel submission and editorial policy

“It is not the policy of *Political Geography* to refuse manuscripts from Israel nor was it ever our policy. What resulted was a consequence of the actions of one editor, David Slater, who had signed the original boycott letter of some British academics. The position of this editor was personal and inconsistent with academic freedom and scientific fairness, and he quickly reversed himself. The paper from Professors Ghanem and Yiftachel was subjected to the usual review process and was accepted after revision and re-submission. No requirements regarding inappropriate comparisons or censorship were imposed on it. The editors, the editorial board and the publishers of *Political Geography* welcome all submissions on topics of political geography and promise fair and impartial scientific review.”

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¹ Other threats to international academic exchange have recently surfaced. The U.S. Department of Treasury, Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) seeks to prohibit the “collaborative work involving scholars subject to U.S. trade embargoes, including Iran, Cuba, North Korea and Sudan. OFAC has asserted that collaborative work would include editing and peer review” (John Wertman “The Washington Monitor” AAG Newsletter September 2004, p. 9). Though appeals for permission to allow editing are allowed, the general rule is that “U.S. persons may not provide the Iranian author substantive or artistic alterations or enhancements of the manuscript” (<http://www.treas.gov/offices/enforcement/ofac/rulings/ia100203.pdf>; accessed 8 September 2004).