If I am Not for Myself, etc. (Thoughts on AHA Vote)

Over the weekend, I attended the American Historical Association (AHA) annual convention in Atlanta. Historians, as a rule, are not a particularly raucous bunch, and the 3,500 or so historians generally went about their business quietly, delivering papers, buying books, trying to cadge free food at various receptions, and the like. But there was one exciting moment.

At the business meeting, there was a vote on a resolution introduced by an organization called Historians Against the War (HAW) condemning Israeli interference with higher education and academic freedom on the West Bank and Gaza, and calling on the AHA to “monitor” Israel’s behavior. This resolution was tailored to garner as much support as possible, and unlike earlier resolutions introduced by HAW, it did not explicitly call for a boycott of Israeli academic institutions. Still, it was an attempt to get the AHA on record against Israel’s educational policies, and perhaps use it as a toehold from which to launch stronger BDS resolutions.

The resolution was trounced, after an hour of debate, 111 nays to 51 yeas. I was a naysayer. I don’t doubt the basic truth of the assertions in the HAW resolution, though it was lacking in nuance and in places too simplistic. Israel’s general ham-fistedness certainly extends to its educational policies in the territories. However, for me the claims in the statement were irrelevant to the matter at hand, which was whether or not, even by implication or indirection, the AHA should take a stand on the Israel and Palestine. I think not.

The organization should be dedicated to scholarship, not political advocacy, and with so many contending opinions on what should be done about Israel and Palestine, options to the right of me, options to the left of me, it would be the height of foolishness for the AHA to get into the business of favoring or proscribing particular political positions. And I think that though Israel’s educational policies in the territories are unjustifiable, it is hardly the only country in the world that discriminates on the basis of ethnicity and religion, and for the AHA to single out Israel in this way is not how to begin a serious discussion of an important issue.

But this resolution, and others like it, have been discussed exhaustively, and I do not need to add to the exhaust. Rather, I want to discuss two other issues the debate raised that have perhaps not been sufficiently acknowledged. First, the vast majority of those voting against the resolution were somewhere left of center; liberals, progressives, even radicals, whatever you call them. To be sure, there were some unambiguous conservatives among the nay voters, but the vast majority were not. Their scholarly work, in one way or another, revolves around the holy trinity of race, class, and gender. They voted for Obama; if they could vote in Israeli elections they would not have voted for Netanyahu. They support J Street, not AIPAC; support B’tselem and Breaking the Silence rather than Im Tirtzu.
They oppose the settlements, and wonder with pained apprehension about the
democratic future of Israel.

Those opposing the resolution represented a range of opinions, of course,
some more to the center, some more to the left. But none of us take our
marching orders from Sheldon Adelson and the anti-BDS organizations he has
formed. The fight against BDS in scholarly organizations is primarily being
waged and won by left of center academics. And the right wing panjandrums
who control the organized Jewish community in North America have taken little
notice of this.

There was one more striking aspect of the debate, as even the outgoing
president of the AHA, Vicki Ruiz, noted. The debate over the HAW resolution
was remarkably internecine. Most of the participants in the debate, pro and
contra, were Jewish. To be sure, there were Palestinian speakers in support
of the resolution, and a few persons who spoke who, using my Jew-dar, seemed
to be unambiguously gentile. But most of the speakers, and as far as I could
tell, most of the people voting, were Jewish. This is perhaps not too
surprising. You can’t be an American Jew, in 2016, without having a strong
position on Israel. Rather than Orthodox, Conservative, and Reform, the most
important taxonomy in American Jewish life has become Meretz, Labor, and
Likud. All Jews are deeply concerned about Israel, and support or opposition
to BDS are two distinct, but in some ways overlapping ways of expressing this
concern.

A corollary of the above is that liberal and progressive non-Jews, including
most of the 90% of AHA members who did not vote on the HAW resolution, would
rather be stuck in a traffic jam on one of Chris Christie’s bridges rather
than talk, or vote, about Israel. Everyone knows the routine—whatever you
say, your head will be bitten off by one side or another. There is no safe or
neutral position. And those without a dog in this particular fight would
prefer to stay on the sidelines. They see all the parties, Israel, the PA,
and Hamas, as having contributed mightily to their collective misery.

“Israel exhaustion” is a widespread phenomenon. To the extent the resolution
seemed to single out Israel and Israeli academic institutions they opposed
it. To the extent the supporters of the resolution seemed to be making
excuses for the occupation, they opposed this as well.

I have long wondered what, if I hadn’t been born Jewish, my position on
Israel and Palestine would be. I strongly suspect that I wouldn’t care about
Israel and Palestine as much as I do. And I suspect that I would be less
interested in finding ways to balance my love of Israel with my hate for the
current direction of the Israeli government. And this balancing act is
becoming increasingly difficult, and the tightrope on which we must stand is
becoming ever more slippery. Israel, and increasingly, the very idea of
Israel, whether in a one or two or many state versions, has lost the support
of most left of center Americans. They simply do not care. And if Israel
continues on its current course, several years hence, Jewish (and non-Jewish)
historians who voted “no” in Atlanta might find themselves on the other side
the next time the AHA debates a BDS resolution.