

Oxford Scholars Betray Their Vocation To Vilify Israel

RCP realclearpolitics.com/articles/2023/12/10/oxford_scholars_betray_their_vocation_to_vilify_israel_150172.html

Peter Berkowitz

Professors set the tone on campus. Those dedicated to liberal education scrupulously conduct and disseminate research that advances understanding of morality, politics, and the physical world. And they teach students to grasp the facts and the data, to examine competing opinions and ideas, and to reach their own conclusions based on arguments and evidence that have been refined by reasoned discussion and lively debate. Professors devoted to liberal education cultivate in young men and women virtues – curiosity, civility, tolerance, and respect for the truth – that are essential to maintaining free and democratic self-government.

Over the last fifty years or so, however, an illiberal vision of the professor’s role has taken hold in the academy. Many faculty members see their task as correcting misfortunes and evils, promoting social justice, and saving the world. They exploit their academic perch to disseminate propaganda under the cover of research and to convert classrooms into recruitment stations for social transformation. This subordination of inquiry to activism robs students of an education that cultivates the virtues of freedom while cheating society of well-educated young citizens. And it polarizes the student body and is bound to amplify division and discord in the larger social and political world undergraduates will soon enter. That’s because professors who politicize the classroom foster ignorance, arrogance, and self-righteousness among those who agree with the officially sanctioned orthodoxy – and generate resentment and anger among those with the temerity to dissent.

Judging by their Oct. 20 “[Open Letter on the Humanitarian Crisis in Israel](#),” many Oxford University scholars failed to acquire the moral and intellectual virtues that yield reliable scholarship and impart liberal education. The 45 Oxford academics who signed the letter grandly addressed it “To the Prime Minister and the Leader of the Opposition, United Kingdom.” Invoking their authority as “scholars of political science, political philosophy, ethics, history, geography, law and the Middle East” – but omitting any relevant experience they might possess in diplomacy and national security – the Oxford scholars urged Britain’s political leaders “to call for an immediate cessation to Israel’s morally disastrous attack on Gaza, and for Israel to allow the free passage of humanitarian aid into Gaza, in addition to continuing to call on Hamas to release the Israeli hostages.”

One would think that eminent academics would bring to an intervention in complex affairs of state the care, precision, and thoughtfulness that are the scholar’s stock-in-trade. Yet, while evincing a sanctimonious certitude that their moral and political conclusions and policy

prescriptions are above reproach, the Oxford scholars managed to pack into their letter's three paragraphs several gross intellectual transgressions including crude distortion, unsupported allegation, and suppression or ignorance of crucial context.

The Oxford scholars, for example, presented dubious legal pronouncements as indisputable judgments. While acknowledging that Hamas' Oct. 7 attack "was a horrific and morally abhorrent act of mass terrorism," and recognizing Israel's "right to take defensive measures against Hamas," the letter writers decreed that "this right does not extend to or justify Israel's current onslaught on the civilian population of Gaza." Yet the letter's signatories do not provide a shred of evidence to support the scurrilous accusation that Israel targets civilian populations, as opposed to causing unintended and unavoidable harm in the pursuit of legitimate military objectives, which is permitted by the international laws of war. To vindicate their accusation, it would have been necessary for the Oxford scholars to apply the relevant legal principles to the realities on the ground in Israel and Gaza. However, they don't consider the character of a proportional response to an enemy that has declared its determination to eliminate Israel; affirmed its readiness to employ "all means and methods"; and, in defiance of international law, built tunnels, munitions factories, weapons arsenals, and command and control centers in and under Gaza's civilian areas, and conducted its military operations from within Gaza's densely populated cities.

The Oxford scholars equate opposing ideas and treat unlike conduct in similar ways. This they accomplish by scandalously insinuating a moral equivalence between Israel's exercise of its right of self-defense and the jihadists who employ terror to destroy the Jewish state: "To think that the atrocities perpetrated by Hamas justify the humanitarian crisis currently unfolding in Gaza is to indulge a central tenet of terrorism – that all citizens must pay for the misdeeds of their governments – as well as terrorism's central practice: collective punishment."

The professors' smear of Israel as a nation that thinks and acts like terrorists conceals the extraordinary efforts that the Jewish state takes to protect noncombatants and ignores the extraordinary efforts Hamas makes to kill Israeli civilians and put Palestinian noncombatants in harm's way. It also obscures that the tragic humanitarian crisis in Gaza is of Hamas' own making. Hamas chose to rampage through southern Israel slaughtering, raping, maiming, and mutilating some 1,200 people, mostly Israeli civilians, and taking some 240 hostages, mostly civilians. Hamas chose to build its military infrastructure, and operate, in Gaza's cities. Hamas, which could at any moment end the carnage by releasing the hostages and surrendering, has chosen to wage jihad against Israel to the bitter end.

The Oxford scholars espouse partisan distortions of complex events. This can be seen in their unwarranted contention that "Israel has deliberately deprived innocent Palestinian civilians – a great number of them children – of water, food and electricity, as well as the means of escape." Israel has imposed a siege on Gaza that is in principle lawful given Hamas' Oct. 7 massacre, the terrorists' protracted efforts to eliminate the Jewish state, and

their resolve to persist in the pursuit of their genocidal goals. It is the jihadists' unlawful conversion of civilian areas into battle zones that has caused Gaza's humanitarian tragedy by compelling Israel, in self-defense, to limit the arrival of water, food, and energy for consumption and use by Hamas.

The Oxford scholars present propaganda as facts. They do this by relying on casualty figures – at the time of their letter approximately 3,500 – from the Gaza Health Ministry, a Hamas institution whose numbers have not been independently verified. They further promulgate propaganda as fact by endorsing the claim of UNRWA – the United Nations Relief and Works Agency in Gaza operates in cooperation with Hamas – that the Gaza war represents an “unprecedented human catastrophe.” Sadly, that's not close to the truth. Two of the world's worst humanitarian crisis in recent times, unfolding in the region for years, dwarf Gaza's deaths and displacement. According to the Council on Foreign Relations, 377,000 have died in the fighting in the eight-year conflict in Yemen between the internationally recognized government and the Iran-backed Houthis while, according to the UN Relief Agency, “Two-thirds of the population of Yemen – 21.6 million people – are in dire need of humanitarian assistance and protection services.” Meanwhile, hundreds of thousands more have died in the almost 13-year war launched by Iranian-backed Syrian government against its own people. Half the Syrian population has been displaced, with more than 5 million fleeing the country.

The Oxford scholars' open letter has provoked several effective rejoinders, including one by six eminent Israeli moral philosophers. The incisive reply by Peter Hacker, emeritus fellow at Oxford's St. John's College and distinguished scholar of philosophy, suggests that all is not lost at the university.

In “A Reply to an Open Letter on the Humanitarian Crisis in Gaza,” Hacker faulted his philosophy colleagues among the letter's signatories whose “vocation is clarity of thought” for demonstrating an inability to “think clearly on matters of such import.” He also reproached the international relations scholars who joined a letter that “fails to place the Hamas onslaught in its current Middle Eastern context.” In addition, he should have admonished the political philosophy scholars and political scientists among the signatories for their blindness to the distinction between a rights-protecting democracy fighting for its survival and jihadists bent on wiping it out.

Unlike the Oxford colleagues whose letter he eviscerates, Hacker takes seriously the geopolitical realities. “To call on Israel for an immediate cessation of hostilities is akin to calling for an immediate cessation of hostilities by Britain and the USA on the eve of D-day in order to avoid civilian casualties,” he wrote. “For Israel to cease its war before eradicating Hamas and its infra-structure would be to perpetuate its rule, to demonstrate Israel's inability to destroy it, and to invite it to regroup and try again in a few years' time, as it has done in the past.”

And in contrast to his Oxford colleagues' reckless assertion "that Israel's instructions to north Gazan citizens to evacuate their homes and move south is a 'war crime of forcible transfer with no guarantee of safety or the right to return,'" Hacker rightly observed that Israel's warnings have "saved thousands of Gazan lives" and "That those who fled south have no right to return is pure Oxonian fantasy."

The Oxford scholars presented their exhortation to Britain's leaders to demand that Israel immediately cease military operations in Gaza as coming from "academics who spend our lives thinking about events such as these." If so, reforming our universities will be the work of generations.

Peter Berkowitz is the Tad and Dianne Taube senior fellow at the Hoover Institution, Stanford University. From 2019 to 2021, he served as director of the Policy Planning Staff at the U.S. State Department. His writings are posted at PeterBerkowitz.com and he can be followed on Twitter @BerkowitzPeter.