The Future of the American Studies Association

Below is an open letter to the President and Executive Committee of the American Studies Association. Though written by faculty at Middlebury College, we hope that many other institutional members of the ASA, American Studies programs, individual members, and present and former officers of the organization will support the letter’s call for discussion of the ASA’s mission statement. Though we do have a position on the recently passed resolution to boycott academic institutions in Israel that we do not wish to disguise, we are less concerned with that particular debate and more concerned about how the ASA will go forward. We are circulating this letter in the hope that others will join us in encouraging the officers and the membership of the ASA to undertake a free and full debate about the language of the Association’s official documents and the voting status of its institutional members. An individual, an institution, or an American Studies program could support or reject the boycott itself and still see the need for the association to clarify its official documents and improve its voting processes. Such clarification might or might not lead to a reconsideration of the boycott resolution in the longer run, but, again, that resolution is not the primary subject of this open letter.

To the President and Executive Committee of the American Studies Association:

The American Studies Program at Middlebury does not support, and will not honor, the American Studies Association’s resolution to boycott academic institutions in Israel. Though we understand the outrage of some in response to the ASA resolution, we do not wish to spend our energies on balkanizing or inflammatory condemnation. We recognize that complex and conflicting views exist on Israeli-Palestinian relations but do not have the expertise or desire to address those in this letter. A careful reading of the ASA resolution suggests that those crafting it took some measures to limit encroachments on the academic freedom of speech and association so essential to higher education. At the same time, we believe that these measures are insufficient and that academic boycotts are bad for colleges, universities, faculty, students, and the collaborative production of knowledge.

Beyond our concerns about the merits of academic boycotts in general (and this one in particular), we are concerned that the ASA resolution is inconsistent with the stated mission of the organization. The ASA seems to be neglecting, or at the very least interpreting in a particularly tendentious way, the language of its own constitution. Effectively a mission statement, Article I, Section 2 of the ASA constitution reads:

Sec. 2. The object of the association shall be the promotion of the study of American culture through the encouragement of research, teaching, publication, the strengthening of relations among persons and institutions in this country and abroad devoted to such studies, and the broadening of knowledge among the general public about American culture in all its diversity and complexity.

We recognize and value the production of rigorous scholarship that provides nuanced critiques of the abuses of political power; we admire political activism and those who would seek to correct social injustices. But if the ASA wishes to turn so much of its institutional energy over to
activist work and contentious votes on geopolitical matters, we believe the membership should adopt a mission statement and constitution explicitly reflecting that goal. Such a mission statement would likely be honorable in its own way, but it would be something different from the passage above.

We, therefore, urge the ASA leadership and all of its members to revisit the Association’s constitution, and, through a fully engaged and democratic process, actively choose to endorse or reject changes to the crucial section quoted above. Doing so will enable a frank and, we hope, productive discussion among members about the appropriate mission of the organization. We hope that such a discussion will define the scope of future actions by the Association so that they are more explicitly consistent with its declared mission, whatever form that future declaration of mission takes. Such a process—and any changes in the mission statement that result—will also assure that those joining the Association do so with full knowledge of the commitments that they are making as members. As a related matter, we call on the ASA to develop a mechanism for institutional members to participate in the Association’s voting. As an institutional member, our program never dreamed that we would be spending so much of our time and energy being asked by our administration, alumni, colleagues, students, and the media to support, explain, defend, or denounce an ASA resolution on which we had no right to vote. In this way, the boycott resolution has worked very much against “the encouragement of research, teaching [and] publication” given emphasis in the organization’s constitution. The ASA must, in the end, be bound in its activities by a readily accessible understanding of its mission, as stated within its official documents.

Our program will, for the time being, maintain its institutional membership in the ASA, not because we support the boycott resolution, but because we value open and engaged debate and the important, decades-long history of the American Studies Association to our field of study. We hope to be part of a larger effort to have the ASA develop a meaningful mission statement that will guide the organization’s activities. We further hope that even those angered by the ASA resolution will understand that commitment to intellectual dialogue is most important when that principle is hardest to believe in, when parties have fundamental differences in understanding.

Our longer-term membership in the ASA is by no means a foregone conclusion, because we do not have a full understanding of the association’s purpose. If we find no constructive engagement on the effort to define more clearly the ASA’s mission, we will, with regret, leave this long-valued institution.

We have also asked the ASA to change the language listing Middlebury College as an institutional member to language listing only the American Studies Program at Middlebury College. Though we hope to see the ASA define itself in ways that will be widely embraced by all who have a stake in the interdisciplinary study of American culture, we do not wish to implicate Middlebury College as a whole, or any other program at the College, in what may now be viewed by some on our campus as an unwelcome affiliation.

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