The right target for a boycott?

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The right target for a boycott?

By Daniel A. Bell
Shortly after the Olympic torch’s troubled passage through Paris last April, Chinese nationalists organized a campaign to boycott the French supermarket Carrefour. The chain store is perhaps the most visible symbol of French life in China, with 135 outlets in the country’s major cities. Thousands of nationalists were mobilized outside Carrefour outlets and many customers were afraid to shop there.

But the boycott was completely irrational. Carrefour China had nothing to do with pro-Tibetan protests in France and even the disabled athlete Jin Jing who was targeted by protesters in France spoke out against the boycott. Over 90 percent of Carrefour China’s employees are Chinese and they were the first to be hit by the boycott. Fortunately, it fizzled out without any major damage.

The general principle is that boycotts only make sense if they target the company that is partly, if not mainly, responsible for the immoral deed identified by protesters. And now, there’s a much better case to boycott a French company. Pierre Berge, personal and business partner of Yves Saint Laurent, put on sale two eighteenth century bronze heads that were looted by British and French forces from the imperial gardens of the Summer Palace outside Beijing in 1860. The site is still rubble and it is a bitter reminder of China’s humiliation at the hands of imperial powers.

The Chinese government had requested their return and a group of Chinese lawyers tried to block the auction but a French court allowed the sale to proceed. Pierre Berge had the chutzpah to claim that the Chinese government could have the looted goods if it would “observe human rights and give liberty to the Tibetan people and welcome the Dalai Lama.” One might imagine the reaction to a collector who says he will return goods looted by the Nazis only if Israel pulls out of the occupied territories.

As it happens, the sale went ahead and the heads were bought by a Chinese collector and auctioneer, Cai Mingchao. With equal chutzpah – and this time, more justified chutzpah – Mr. Cai said that he won’t pay the money on moral grounds. The outcome of this fascinating case remains unclear, but what’s clear is that Pierre Berge and Yves Saint Laurent are responsible for this mess and they should pay the price.

In 1861, the great French writer Victor Hugo wrote, “I hope that a day will come when France, delivered and cleansed, will return this booty to despoiled China.” It’s never too late to fulfill this hope. What anti-imperialists everywhere can do is boycott Yves Saint Laurent products until they deliver the looted goods back to their rightful Chinese owners. So, yes, there is a case for boycotting Yves Saint Laurent. But it should be a targeted and non-violent boycott, not a general attack on innocent French people and companies.

This piece appeared in Chinese on March 10 as “中国人该抵制谁” in 环球时报. Daniel A. Bell is a professor of philosophy at Tsinghua University and the author, most recently, of China’s New Confucianism.

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