

Last month [20 November 2015], the American Anthropological Association resolved to vote on a boycott of Israeli universities: www.americanantbro.org/StayInformed/NewsDetail.aspx?ItemNumber=13213

Having endorsed this resolution by signing the initiating petition anthroboycott.wordpress.com/signatories, I've been asked to explain my position for a magazine article. Here is my response.

As a grad student during the mid 80's, I participated in campaigns to divest endowment funds from companies propping up South African Apartheid — a system of land confiscation, labor control and cultural dominance based on the unscientific concept of human “races” (cf. Boas 1940). The Pretorian regime was a settler colonial standout and indeed holdout shielded by Cold War calculus, which is why Ronald Reagan shoveled military and diplomatic aid to “contra”-style proxy forces in Angola and Mozambique. Not only did my university derive financial benefit from this arrangement, it was also ideologically complicit, for example headlining Samuel Huntington at a gala forum at the Harvard 350th jamboree in the fall of 1986. Professor Huntington's skittish remarks were upended during the question period when his published staunch defense of “praetorian democracy” (1968) was quoted back to him by Damon Silvers, a student of labor sociology speaking truth to power. No one in attendance can forget how Huntington was rendered speechless, gasping for breath to defend the indefensible as the Science Center auditorium spontaneously cleared. (Poor Huntington found his Manichean voice again a few years later.) It's too much to expect a wordless response from Harvard's Professor Dershowitz now, but in most other respects the West Bank and Gaza are remarkably like the former Bantustans, as found by South African observers including Archbishop Desmond Tutu and (briefly) Judge Richard Goldstone.

The present AAA resolution is only partial BDS, and is still to be voted by the full organization (I'm a lapsed member), but the idea is clear enough. Academics can't match AIPAC's lobbysome grip on the U.S. Congress (Mearsheimer & Walt 2006) and have no clout with the Christian Zionist wing of the Republican Party, but a professional guild can still try to raise the occupation's institutional cost, hearten peaceniks and push back against the assigned role of complacent “Mandarins” (Chomsky 1969) within the neoliberal university. (Salaita's Urbana case was a nice litmus test of the latter point.) Chomsky has dissed BDS as a feelgood symbol (Almeghari 2012), but his thinking may evolve, as unchecked occupation turns the “one-state solution” from pie-in-the-sky to fact-on-the-ground. The failure of ‘constructive engagement’ with Israel has dawned on anyone paying attention to the cynical cycles of glad-handing followed by hand-wringing in Washington DC. Chomsky rightly rebukes activists who seek personal absolution in mere gestural politics, and many ardent anti-Apartheid campaigners were too slow to recognize the ANC's moulting into neoliberal managers in 1994 (Kasrils 2013), but this time around there's less reticence to admit that the inheritors of “Arafat's derelictions” (Said 2001) have turned “quasi-collaborationist” (Falk 2014). Obviously the Israeli occupation is not the worst human emergency currently on earth, but it's one for which the U.S. has been too responsible for too long, so by Chomsky's own logic (1967) it's a situation where U.S. intellectuals should be ashamed to hide in fake neutrality. Hence the AAA initiative and my support.

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References

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UPDATES

12 March 2016 The frequent objection that boycott stifles dialogue is well answered in these posts:

- Alessandrini, A. [2011]. Bad faith at the book festival. 26 February. www.jadaliyya.com/pages/index/748/bad-faith-at-the-book-festival.
- Reinhart, T. [2003]. Academic boycott: in support of Paris IV. *Borderlands* 2.3. www.borderlands.net.au/vol2no3_2003/reinhart_paris_iv.htm.

3 May 2016 With engaging self-awareness, Norman Finkelstein explains his non-endorsement of BDS in this interview: mondoweiss.net/2016/04/norman-finkelstein-on-sanders-the-first-intifada-bds-and-ten-years-of-unemployment. He argues:

- (i) Palestinian civil society is weak and coopted—in his words, “an illusion”.
- (ii) BDS serves as a convenient Satan for Israeli public relations: “It became the new pretext for Israel to play victim. ... The irony is, while Netanyahu wails that BDS wants to delegitimize Israel, in fact he is manipulating BDS to delegitimize principled criticism of the occupation and settlements.”
- (iii) BDS somehow enables the tendentious conflation of anti-Zionism with anti-Jewish ethnocentrism, shifting attention away from human rights and towards ideological casuistry. “[W]henever you talk about human rights, Israel wants to talk about anti-Semitism. ... The difference between Zionism and Apartheid—which clearly became a term of opprobrium—is that there was never a quarrel about what Apartheid signified. Everyone understood it meant separate and effectively unequal development. ... But Zionism doesn't have a clear-cut definition, that's why both Chomsky and Netanyahu can call themselves Zionists. It's just a distraction, which is why Israel loves to talk about it.”
- (iv) BDS is ego-trip rhetorical adornment for “tenured radicals” like “Perry Anderson... the leading Bolshevik in UCLA's faculty cafeteria”.

Point (i) may be true or exaggerated, but either way it's not compelling so long as external solidarity could still help a strong civil rights movement to develop under the occupation. Finkelstein says "the situation is hopeless, for now", but that could be defeatist. He rightly insists—as also noted in my own statement above—that solidarity easily derails into exoticist romanticism, but the only antidote is engaged understanding, which is no less incumbent on BDS than it was for anti-Apartheid campaigners. But it's illogical to make a vibrant Palestinian civil society a precondition for any action.

Complaints (ii) and (iii) are properly directed at occupation apologists not BDS supporters. As a tactic, BDS brings comparisons of Zionism with Apartheid, Jim Crow etc. into focus. So if Zionism *qua* theology is just too nebulous to discuss intelligently, why not talk about occupation and settler-colonialism? Those terms finesse the exceptionalist red herring and reflect back on the North American experience in a way that Finkelstein would appreciate. But the distinction is tangential. Few if any settler colonial projects have been theology-free, for reasons familiar to Max Weber, so quibbling over the most appropriate label for the source of Palestinian grievance is another distraction.

As to tenure (iv), Finkelstein was unfairly denied his own at DePaul by Professor Dershowitz's "frenetic and relentless campaign" (Howard 2007), but it's no news that tenure is a racket, or that living well is the best revenge. And thanks to The Dersh, there's one less Perry Anderson to kick around!

To conclude on a more serious note: Finkelstein observes that the occupation faces "the obstacle, which thus far remains insuperable, of lacking international legitimacy. The international community still does not accept the settlements or the occupation". So how exactly is BDS irrelevant to this important fact?

Howard, J. [2007]. Harvard Law professor seeks to block tenure for adversary at DePaul U. *Chronicle of Higher Education* **53.32**, 13 April. [Article text behind firewall.]

2 September 2016 The Movement for Black Lives endorses BDS:

policy.m4bl.org/invest-divest citing inter alia bdsmovement.net and www.blackpalestiniansolidarity.com

5 January 2017 Jeffrey Sacks (compliforlang.ucr.edu/people/faculty/bio.html?page=sacks.html), translator of Mahmoud Darwish (en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mahmoud_Darwish), critiques MLA president Tony Appiah's boilerplate deflection of (president.mla.hcommons.org/2016/11/02/taking-issue-taking-stock) yet another Northamerican academic referendum on BDS:

An open letter to Kwame Anthony Appiah, President of the Modern Language Association
by Jeffrey Sacks, Jan 04 2017

www.jadaliyya.com/pages/index/25811/an-open-letter-to-kwame-anthony-appiah-president-o

This ballot may reveal whether echt postmodernists can 'sublate' (en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Aufheben) their trademark ironic detachment from tangible political engagements—a consequential matter for tenurati and wannabes alike.

16 March 2017 Writing at the invitation of the U.N. Economic & Social Commission for Western Asia, Richard Falk (www.princeton.edu/faculty-research/faculty/rfalk) and Virginia Tilley (cola.siu.edu/politicalscience/faculty-staff/faculty/political-science/tilley.php) find "that Israel maintains a regime of apartheid in its exercise of control over the Palestinian people"—see these archived links:

web.archive.org/web/20170316014234/https://www.unescwa.org/publications/israeli-practices-palestinian-people-apartheid-occupation
web.archive.org/web/20170316054753/https://www.unescwa.org/sites/www.unescwa.org/files/publications/files/israeli-practices-palestinian-people-apartheid-occupation-english.pdf

19 March 2017 U.N. Secretary-General Antonio Guterres has intervened to quash the aforementioned Falk-Tilley report, causing the chair of ESCWA, Under-Secretary General Rima Khalaf, to resign in protest:

web.archive.org/web/20170317182651/http://uk.reuters.com/article/uk-un-israel-report-resignation-idUKKBN16O253
www.jadaliyya.com/pages/index/26224/text-of-resignation-letter-by-escwa-executive-secr

22 March 2017 Four of Israel's twelve prime ministers since 1948, including David Ben-Gurion, have invoked apartheid as a logical consequence of the prolonged occupation of Palestine:

theintercept.com/2017/03/22/top-israelis-have-warned-of-apartheid-so-why-the-outrage-at-a-un-report

14 October 2017 Ilan Pappé (socialsciences.exeter.ac.uk/iaais/staff/pappe), a historian of the ethnic cleansing of Palestine, is interviewed about BDS, Apartheid and the democratization of the "knowledge commons":

Is the U.S. left truly anti-Zionist?; an interview with Ilan Pappé about his new book co-authored with Noam Chomsky titled *On Palestine*. Khalil Bendib, 20 May 2015 www.statushour.com/ilan-pappe.html

Activism and political organising in academia; a conversation with Ilan Pappé. Carol Que, 11 October 2017
www.opendemocracy.net/ilan-pappe-carol-que/activism-and-political-organising-in-academia-conversation-with-ilan-pappe

23 October 2017 Avi Shlaim (users.ox.ac.uk/~ssf0005), "there is no hope for the Palestinians to bring about the end of occupation through the support of western governments or the UN, the only hope that the Palestinians have is through BDS":

www.jadaliyya.com/pages/index/27251/quick-thoughts-avi-shlaim-on-israel-s-new-historia

19 July 2018 The apartheid project ratchets up another notch:

www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/israel-jewish-nation-state-law-passed-arabs-segregation-protests-benjamin-netanyahu-a8454196.html

14 August 2018 Dr. Kobi Snitz (www.weizmann.ac.il/neurobiology/worg/lab.html) "It's true that this conflict is not special in how bad the violations are. What is special is how much the liberal west actively supports them."

www.theguardian.com/news/2018/aug/14/bds-boycott-divestment-sanctions-movement-transformed-israeli-palestinian-debate

3 January 2019 "...Goldstone was harassed by the Jewish community in South Africa. He was to have been effectively barred from his grandson's *bar mitzva*, a prohibition later rescinded. He was dropped from the board of governors of the Hebrew University. And his family – especially his daughter Nicole, who is described in Terris's book as "an ardent Zionist" – found themselves shunned too. ...Along with accusations that he had acted like a Nazi collaborator in excoriating the Jews of Israel, an Israeli press campaign began..."

www.independent.co.uk/voices/israel-gaza-war-judge-richard-goldstone-palestinian-conflict-a8709211.html