
Having endorsed this resolution by signing the initiating petition [antiboycott.wordpress.com/signatories](http://antiboycott.wordpress.com/signatories), I’ve been asked by “Alex J. Goldstein” (email, 11 December 01h36) to explain my position for Boston Magazine. 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 unpended during the question period when his published staunch defense of “pragmator 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 respects the West Bank and Gaza are remarkably like the former Bustanats, as found by South African observers including Archbishop Desmond Tutu and (briefly) Judge Richard Goldstone.

The present AAA resolution is only partial BDS [cf. https://lasdovement.net/what-is-bds](https://lasdovement.net/what-is-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 dismissed 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 cyclical 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.

Victor Manfredi
Visiting researcher, African Studies Center, Boston University
people.bu.edu/~manfredi

11 December 2015

References

Almeghari, R. [2012]. Chomsky in Gaza: academic boycott “will strengthen support for Israel”. The Electronic Intifada, 20 October.

electronicintifada.net/content/chomsky-gaza-academic-boycott-will-strengthen-support-israel/11795.


[1993]. The clash of civilizations? Foreign Affairs 72, 22-49.


REFERENCES

[Almeghari 2012].

[Boas 1940].

[Center for Constitutional Rights 2015].

[Chomsky 1967].

[Chomsky 1969].

[Falk et al. 2014].

[Kasrils 2013].

[Mearsheimer & Walt 2006].

[Said 2001].

[Said 2006].

[UPDATES]


11 December 2015

3 May 2016 With engaging self-awareness, Norman Finkelstein defends 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. Consider his arguments:

(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]hen 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 decays 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 1. In retrospect, the journo bait was probably disingenuous, cf. theintercept.com/2017/09/06/how-right-wing-extremists-stalk-docs-and-harass-their-enemies.
BDS supporters. As a tactic, BDS brings comparisons of Zionism with Apartheid, Jim Crow etc. into focus. So if Zionism qua theology is 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 distortion. 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. Thanks to The Dersh, there’s one less Perry Anderson to kick around! On a more serious note: Finkelstein observes that the occupation faces “the obstacle, which thus far remains insuperable, of lacking international legitimacy. It is a process that has gradually grown more institutionalized and explicit, with mechanisms introduced over time in law and practice to promote Jewish supremacy. These accumulated measures, their pervasiveness in legislation and political practice, and the apartheid regime. Israeli apartheid, which promotes the supremacy of Jews over Palestinians, was not born in one day or of a single part. So if Zionism qua theology is 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 distortion. 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. Thanks to The Dersh, there’s one less Perry Anderson to kick around! On a more serious note: Finkelstein observes that the occupation faces “the obstacle, which thus far remains insuperable, of lacking international legitimacy. It is a process that has gradually grown more institutionalized and explicit, with mechanisms introduced over time in law and practice to promote Jewish supremacy. These accumulated measures, their pervasiveness in legislation and political practice, and the apartheid regime. Israeli apartheid, which promotes the supremacy of Jews over Palestinians, was not born in one day or of a single part
subjugated Palestinians by virtue of their identity to varying degrees of intensity. In certain areas, as described in this report, these deprivations are so severe that they amount to crimes that invoke the norms of apartheid and persecution.


21 May 2021 Middle East Section, American Anthropological Association: “…Israel’s policies of closure, land confiscation, house demolitions and dispossession of Palestinians, unlawful arrest, injury and killing of Palestinian civilians have continued unabated since the Apartheid regime. That Israel is an Apartheid state. “…security” as the permanent control over the territory it occupies and tries to annex. “…The regular violations of Palestinians’ rights are not accidental repetitions of offences, but part of an institutionalized regime of systematic oppression and domination. […] Israel’s system of institutionalized segregation and discrimination against Palestinians, as a racial group, in all areas under its control amounts to a system of apartheid, and a serious violation of Israel’s human rights obligations. Almost all of Israel’s civilian administration and military authorities, as well as governmental and quasi-governmental institutions, are involved in the enforcement of a system of apartheid against Palestinians across Israel and the OPT and against Palestinian refugees and their descendants outside the OPT. The intention to maintain this system has been explicitly declared by successive Israeli political leaders, emphasizing the overarching objective of apartheid: preventing the establishment of a Palestinian state and maintaining the aforesaid context; (f) the mental element of awareness by the party committing the acts of the presence of the aforesaid elements. … The crime of apartheid is being committed in the West Bank because, in this context of a regime of domination and oppression of one national group by another, the Israeli authorities implement policies and practices that contribute to the inhuman acts as the term is defined in international law: Denial of rights from a national group, denial of resources from one group and their transfer to another, denial of development to Palestinians and at the same time, encouraged development for Israelis, physical and legal separation between the two groups and the institution of a different legal system for each of them. …That is not all. …Continued creeping legal annexation, let alone the adoption of legislation that would apply Israeli law and administration there, is an amalgamation of the regimes. This could mean strengthening the argument, which already is being heard, that the crime of Apartheid is not committed only in the West Bank. That the Israeli regime in its entirety is an apartheid regime. That Israel is an Apartheid state.”


1 February 2022 “The continuing forced displacement of a majority of Palestinians from their land and property in 1947-49 and subsequently in 1967; the forced deportations, forcible transfers and arbitrary restrictions on their freedom of movement; the denial of nationality and the right of return; the racialized and discriminatory dispossession of their lands and property; and the subsequent discriminatory allocation of and access to national resources (including land, housing and water) combine to hinder Palestinians’ current enjoyment of their rights, including to access to education, healthcare, food security, water and sanitation, and education opportunities. They ensure that Palestinians cannot as individuals or communities enjoy a status equal to that of Jewish Israelis in Israel, the OPT and other situations where Israel exercises control over Palestinians’ enjoyment of their rights, particularly the right of return. […] The racial discrimination against and segregation of Palestinians is the result of deliberate government policy. The regular violations of Palestinians’ rights are not accidental repetitions of offences, but part of an institutionalized regime of systematic oppression and domination. […] Israel’s system of institutionalized segregation and discrimination against Palestinians, as a racial group, in all areas under its control amounts to a system of apartheid, and a serious violation of Israel’s human rights obligations. Almost all of Israel’s civilian administration and military authorities, as well as governmental and quasi-governmental institutions, are involved in the enforcement of a system of apartheid against Palestinians across Israel and the OPT and against Palestinian refugees and their descendants outside the OPT. The intention to maintain this system has been explicitly declared by successive Israeli political leaders, emphasizing the overarching objective of apartheid: preventing the establishment of a Palestinian state and maintaining the aforesaid context; (f) the mental element of awareness by the party committing the acts of the presence of the aforesaid elements. … The crime of apartheid is being committed in the West Bank because, in this context of a regime of domination and oppression of one national group by another, the Israeli authorities implement policies and practices that contribute to the inhuman acts as the term is defined in international law: Denial of rights from a national group, denial of resources from one group and their transfer to another, denial of development to Palestinians and at the same time, encouraged development for Israelis, physical and legal separation between the two groups and the institution of a different legal system for each of them. …That is not all. …Continued creeping legal annexation, let alone the adoption of legislation that would apply Israeli law and administration there, is an amalgamation of the regimes. This could mean strengthening the argument, which already is being heard, that the crime of Apartheid is not committed only in the West Bank. That the Israeli regime in its entirety is an apartheid regime. That Israel is an Apartheid state.”


21 September 2022 per avv. Francesca Albanese, Special Rapporteur to UNGA: “As an occupier, Israel has no sovereignty over the occupied Palestinian territory. […] The profound illegality of the situation in the occupied Palestinian territory emanates from the intentional unlawful displacement of its native (and refugee) Palestinian inhabitants, coupled with alteration of the legal status, geographical nature and demographic composition of the occupied territory through fragmentation of land, seizure and exploitation of natural resources, impairment of Palestinian economic development, through and for a (growing) colonist minority. […] The violations described in the present report expose the nature of the Israeli occupation: that of an intentionally acquisitive, segregationist and repressive regime designed to prevent the realization of the Palestinian people’s right to self-determination.”


23 February 2023 Generative Linguists in the Old World (glowlinguistics.org) has rescinded (61y, 52n, 57 nonvoting) the plan to hold the 47th (2024) colloquium in two publications in Israel. The proposal had been agreed in 2021 (26v, 13n), notwithstanding political harrassant of international visitors, as inflicted on Chomsky in May 2010, then on 16 January 2023 the broader GLOW community decided (132y, 86n, 193 nonvoting) to revisit the issue. For this success, BDS must thank the overtly “theocratic” and “annexationist” government installed on 29 December 2022 (www.yisem.com/2022/12/29/world/middleeast/israel-netanyahu-government-swearing-in.htm).

web.archive.org/web/20231004190138/http://icloud.uvic.ac.uk/index.php/s/469lqSr8p7E8G/downloadpath=5%2F&file=2022-05-17_AgainstChomskyIsrae.pdf

9 June 2023 per avv. Francesca Albanese, Special Rapporteur to UNGA: “The incarceration of Palestinians is only one element of a larger carceral landscape, extending beyond prison as a paradigm of governance of the occupied territory and confinement of its population. […] By shifting from ‘the security of the occupying power’ to ‘the security of the occupation itself’, Israel has disguised ‘security’ as the permanent control over the territory it occupies and tries to annex.”


24 July 2023 “The American Anthropological Association (AAA) membership has voted to endorse a resolution to boycott Israeli academic institutions.”

Israeli demonstrators carry placards during a demonstration condemning the shooting of Iyad Hallak, a disabled Palestinian man who was shot dead by Israeli police after they mistakenly thought he was armed with a pistol, in Jerusalem on May 30, 2020.

Photo by Ahmad GHARABLI, AFP