

# ASSUMING BOYCOTT

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RESISTANCE

AGENCY

CULTURAL  
PRODUCTION

EDITED BY

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**RESISTANCE, AGENCY, AND**  
**CULTURAL PRODUCTION**

**Edited by**  
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## EXTENDING CO-RESISTANCE

Eyal Weizman and Kareem Estefan

*Kareem Estefan: Like other boycotts and political campaigns predicated on collective withdrawal from events and institutions, the Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions (BDS) movement is generally considered to wield a negative form of agency. The cultural and academic boycott, in particular, is said to obstruct—or, its opponents would argue, censor—cultural production. While it is no doubt true that BDS has impeded certain events from proceeding, such a perspective overlooks the more significant fact that a cultural boycott engenders conversations about the political stakes of art, in and beyond the context of Palestine/Israel, which otherwise would not take place. For example, a boycott campaign launched against an exhibition supported by the Israeli Ministry of Culture, far from shutting down all conversation, will redirect the energies of mounting an art show toward the work of raising awareness about Israel's settler-colonial violence, and where Israeli cultural production stands in relation to the state's political policies. Such efforts can transform discourse about the symbolic politics of representation—what art depicts, and how—into debates about the concrete political effects of representation—what art does, and in what context—in normalizing or resisting segregation and colonization. From this perspective,*

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*the cultural boycott of Israel is a demonstration of extraordinary positive agency: the power to shape conversations about culture that bring the long-repressed rights, demands, and analyses of Palestinians to the forefront.*

*Speaking at a panel on the meaning of BDS in the Vera List Center's "Assuming Boycott" series last year, the architect and political theorist Eyal Weizman invoked the concept of "co-resistance," referring to acts of civil disobedience undertaken in West Bank villages like Nabi Saleh and Bi'lin, where Israeli and international solidarity activists have joined Palestinians in weekly nonviolent protests of the occupation. Co-resistance is one way to frame adherence to the BDS guidelines that underscores the active engagement that solidarity entails, even when it means declining an invitation to speak at a university or deciding not to make art commissioned for a major exhibition. In the context of a boycott campaign, co-resistance unsettles the binary of action and non-action, instead channeling creative social energies from one field of action to another. With this in mind, I asked Weizman how more cultural platforms could become sites of co-resistance, pursuing an analogy he introduced at his "Assuming Boycott" talk: BDS as a form of withdrawal and production akin to the general strike.*

**Eyal Weizman:** I support the BDS movement. It is a form of civil action directed at Israeli colonial practices and simultaneously at those Western governments, above all that of the United States, which support nearly all of Israel's actions and continually reward the state with unparalleled financial, diplomatic, and cultural support. It has become popular in part because, at its most basic level, it turns *non-action* into a form of activism. This helps people living in the United States or Europe to avoid institutional relations with Israel; however, the demand that it poses on people closer to and more involved in the issue is different. Withdrawal needs to be complemented with other avenues for action. Wherever BDS cuts off or impedes a relation with a state institution, the movement should find—perhaps even create—new forums for solidarity and cultural production.

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One of my favorite parts of the PACBI guidelines makes the distinction between cohabitation and co-resistance, explaining that in a situation of structural violence, mere cohabitation maintains the status quo. Along these lines, I think that the academic and cultural boycott needs to be seen as an intervention in the production of knowledge, rather than simply a series of obstructions. Since taking up the call of BDS, I have started lecturing locally only in association with select, committed human rights organizations, such as Zochrot, Yesh Din, Al Haq, or the Regional Council of Unrecognized Villages of Negev, and through the Decolonizing Architecture Art Residency (DAAR) studio in Beit Sahour, in which I'm a partner. These groups promote new means to understand and creatively grapple with the ongoing social, political, and spatial effects of Israeli colonization, and given the way the Israeli government persecutes them, they need support.

Once we understand it as a movement channeling intellectual and political energy away from Israeli institutions, BDS becomes part of a wider spectrum of political actions that *block* non-democratic and unequal platforms and *open* democratic platforms for co-resistance. It is a matter of forging communities of practice, wherein action produces political constituencies and radical subjectivities among those who withdraw from the state. Of course, withdrawal is in itself action—a good example is the general strike. Consider theories of the general strike from the early twentieth century, like those of Rosa Luxemburg, in which the strike is not only a form of non-action or a means to avoid work; its purpose is also to build solidarity, steal back time, and make space for other forms of living. A strike is labor directed to new ends: it opens up sites for organization and contributes to resistance, resilience, and the communal production of knowledge. It is also an important stage in the process of revolution and political transformation. The strike already has a great tradition in the Palestinian struggle. In the first

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intifada, for example, strikes led to the closures of schools, and informal academies popped up in the very places—garages, workshops, shops—that were shut off from the outside world, including the Israeli economy.

The challenge for the BDS movement is to find and create platforms that are egalitarian and democratic—to provide alternatives to the forms of culture and politics that exist. So, if we consider theories of the general strike as a withdrawal and an interruption, we should also ask, where is the site of creation in BDS? How do we move from a stage of undermining Israel's legitimacy by applying the force of withdrawal to a next step of building alternative, egalitarian spaces?

To put it differently, not only do we need to boycott Israeli universities because they serve the apparatus of Israeli domination; and not only do we need to boycott Israeli galleries and museums because they put a lick of paint over colonialism; but equally, we need to open universities and art spaces that adhere to the principles of BDS and can become sites of co-resistance, and not, as is often contended, sites of separation. Building activist institutions such as these would also help counter the false claim that the cultural and academic boycott restricts freedom of expression and academic freedom.

*K.E.: I agree: it is important to emphasize the conversations, relations, ideas, and institutions that develop through boycott, especially in light of critiques of BDS as an impediment to academic and cultural activity. But what would a general strike look like in Palestine/Israel, where populations are not only fragmented but, as Ariella Azoulay and Adi Ophir have shown, differentially governed? What are the conditions in which co-resistance can emerge, when you have so many segregated groups afforded different rights and facing unequal economic and political conditions? The implications and impact of withdrawal for Palestinians in the West Bank, for Jewish Israeli citizens, and for Palestinian citizens of Israel, for example, are radically dissimilar. Meanwhile, Palestinians in Gaza have already been effectively removed from*



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*the Israeli economy, not to mention Israeli citizens' field of visibility, through a decade-long blockade. In a context in which Israel has concentrated most Palestinians in discrete territories apart from its own economic centers, how can the general strike build alternative communities of the sort you describe? How can it negate the differential impact of Israeli rule, which subjects Palestinians, to varying extents according to their structural positions, to economic, political, and military forms of violence?*

**E.W.:** First, one would have to ask: What are you withdrawing from, what are you striking against? The brutality of the Israeli military apparatus and the settlers is abundantly clear to anyone paying attention. But we need to look at the more intricate ways in which cultural and academic production in Israel is connected to these systems of domination. This is not just about the exclusion of Palestinian students from Israeli universities and other educational institutions. Nor is it only about the research and development functions of universities that are built upon and benefit from political violence enacted against Palestinians, for example through military technologies such as drones, cyber-weapons, and armed bulldozers. Nor is it only about the soft acquiescence of most Israeli academics, excepting several important voices, like Anat Matar or Neve Gordon (who support BDS), to the injustices they witness within and around their own institutions. Universities also develop more intricate lines of legitimation, both legal and ethical, whose overall effect is to authorize the actions of the Israeli regime. Legitimation is not simply an aftereffect of repressive actions, or a process external to them; legitimation is the condition of possibility for ongoing perpetration. If denial is directed to the past, legitimation is aimed at the future. It is thus more dangerous and more urgent to address. The incredible apparatus that Israel has constructed exercises both the hard power of physical transformation and the softer power that has managed to legitimize injustice to the extent that calling it criminal

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has itself been criminalized. To face this challenge, BDS must become a site of knowledge production in another way: it must continuously map all the intricate ways in which knowledge flows, and academic, legal, and political networks intersect, to legitimize the state of affairs.

Luxemburg's model of the general strike should have—and could have, according to her—united the workers of Germany and France in their refusal to fight and kill each other. It could have succeeded, that is, only by transgressing national borders. To continue the analogy, BDS unites activists in Palestine within the '67 or '48 borders and impacts the entire domain of colonial domination, from taxing and infrastructure to court decisions and military actions, in addition to reaching abroad. Through rupture it can connect the separate actors within a field it creates.

*K.E.: Let's step back for a moment and consider where BDS stands today in relation to what could be called its "intended audience": citizens of the Western countries that have historically provided the most significant political and financial backing for the Israeli occupation regime. In the United States, BDS activists have recently celebrated victories like the endorsement of the academic boycott of Israel by the American Studies Association, major divestments from the occupation by the Presbyterian Church and the United Methodist Church, and widespread endorsements of the cultural boycott by prominent artists and musicians. A Pew Research poll conducted in May 2016 showed that, for the first time, Democrats who identify as "liberal" (the only other options it provided were "moderate" and "conservative") sympathize more with Palestinians than with Israel, a shift that enabled frank debate about the occupation and BDS to publicly unfold on the Democratic Party platform committee, thanks in large part to appointees of Senator Bernie Sanders, namely Cornel West and James Zogby.*

*At the same time, combatting this surge of support for Palestinian rights are politicians of both major U.S. parties, who have enacted state-level*

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*legislation blacklisting organizations that boycott Israel. Anti-BDS bills have become the law in New York and roughly a dozen other states, according to Palestine Legal. What are your thoughts about the status of BDS in the United States and Europe today? How are debates about the Israeli occupation and Palestinian rights evolving, in light of both on-the-ground conditions in Palestine/Israel, and other developments like the Syrian refugee crisis, the rise in xenophobic right-wing populism, and the simultaneous ascendance of left-wing protest movements targeting white supremacy, economic inequality, and climate change?*

**E.W.:** The fact that the United States and many European nations have lined up to support Israel's campaign against BDS signals to me that these countries have given up on ending the occupation and resolving the conflict—if they ever had such aims at all. The BDS campaign should be an uncontroversial appeal to universal human rights, but it is being criminalized because it represents the last challenge to Israeli hegemony. This creates a big division between Western governments and their citizens, as support for Israeli actions has seen a steady decline, and, as you note, more and more people—especially young people—are eager to support Palestinian equality and self-determination. By supporting BDS as a resident of New York today, you protest both Israel and U.S. policies in the Middle East—and, absurdly, *you* will be boycotted, in the sense of being sanctioned, by the state. The stakes are much higher because of the alignment of the entire political class against BDS. In this context, BDS can become a revolutionary force against Western leaders.

At the same time, reactionary, xenophobic politics is clearly on the rise in the United States and Europe, exemplified in the figures of Donald Trump, Nigel Farage, and Marine Le Pen. Indeed, as Israel continues to govern Palestinians as non-citizens, or as second-class citizens, it looks to Europe, and it is now satisfied to see that many right-wing parties are

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thinking about refugees the same way it has for decades. Indeed, both the United States and many European nations are now reluctant to accept Muslim refugees from the Middle Eastern wars they have launched or helped to create, and they continue to support Israel's refusal to even discuss the readmission of Palestinians it has expelled. Today Israel looks like a pioneer in the management of unwanted refugees, the poor, and the dispossessed, in a politics of separation and containment. The control of Palestinians has become almost absolute: even if we see, here and there, acts of resistance, think of how few there are, given that millions of Palestinians are suffering under occupation! This system of managing people has been honed and perfected. Israeli society pays a very low price for holding down millions of Palestinians. So rather than European politicians saying to Israeli politicians, *stop what you're doing*, Israelis are saying to Europeans, *Look what we can do*. And facing an unprecedented refugee crisis, the European political class is eager to listen.

The rising fascism in Europe and the United States mirrors rampant fascism in Israel, and we need to protest both before more and more Israeli technologies and policies of domination spread. Israel treats Palestine as a laboratory for military and political control; we must instead look to Palestine as a place where modes of civil-society resistance are being developed.

*K.E.:* At your Vera List Center talk, you said of BDS, "The more proximate you get to the situation, the more complex the picture becomes." Can you expand on what you see as the differences between adhering to the boycott internationally and participating in it from within Israel or the occupied territories?

*E.W.:* The problem of working from inside is more complicated, of course. Adalah, the advocacy organization for Palestinian citizens of Israel, has a deep understanding of the idea of resistance from within and across the spectrum. In fact, the '48ers are posed with the greatest

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dilemmas. Part of the struggle is to turn Israel into a democratic state of all its citizens, and prominent figures like Hanin Zu'abi—leader of the progressive Balad party, now part of the alliance of Palestinian-led parties known as the Joint List—have been elected to the Knesset to assert the equality of Palestinians who are otherwise considered second-class citizens.

Yet this kind of action is not without its problems. In Forensic Architecture, we work with Palestinian petitioners across all areas of Israeli control, and we know that the courts in Israel enact the laws that propel and legitimate dispossession. Israeli spokespersons, meanwhile, claim that the state does everything in its power to investigate soldiers and charge them for criminal offenses where appropriate, rendering international process redundant. International humanitarian law is bound by the principle of “complementarity.” The International Criminal Court (ICC), for example, is mandated to be a “court of last resort” that will step in only if states show themselves unable or unwilling to launch processes to address violations of international law. Prosecuting a few cases here and there is a useful way for states like Israel to demonstrate that its legal system is competent and willing to examine itself. But its overwhelming purpose is to protect perpetrators and legitimate Israel’s ongoing violence and land grabs.

In 2014, despite several isolated legal successes, we at Forensic Architecture determined that withdrawal is preferable to cooperating with the Israeli legal system, that confronting Israel’s regime of domination is more effective outside of the state’s legal institutions, and that despite being compromised in other ways, international forums provide a better chance at an even-handed process. We have decided we will no longer undertake forensic analysis on behalf of cases presented in Israeli legal forums, nor pass on material to Israeli legal institutions (though for the moment we continue work on cases we have already

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initiated). But we remain committed to investigating and publicizing Israel's human rights violations, at the same time as we will expose and denounce the violence perpetrated by Israeli legal institutions themselves.

*K.E.:* *The Joint List represents something of a tactical shift away from boycott; many Palestinian citizens of Israel who had always boycotted elections decided to participate for the first time in 2015, as a result of this new alliance. The Joint List now represents the third largest bloc in the Knesset, holding 13 of 120 seats. How do you interpret this development, which on the surface may appear to contradict the ethos of BDS, encouraging further engagement with an oppressive system, rather than total disengagement?*

**E.W.:** As a supporter of the BDS movement, and an artist and professor adhering to the call of PACBI, I would like to see the expansion of the boycott's terms, and productive variations of its tactics. For academics in the United States, who are personally removed from the situation and have little ability to intervene directly, disengagement from Israeli institutions is absolutely necessary. When you are working in Palestine-Israel, especially in '48, the issue is no longer abstract, and decisions in relation to BDS frequently have to be undertaken anew. The closer you are, the more powerful, the more meaningful, such decisions become. Within this context, I find the Joint List very inspiring and consider its existence an act of resistance. As with every Israeli election, many Palestinians with Israeli papers debated whether to boycott the elections. I support the Joint List and think of it as an important part of an anticolonial movement.

Recently, I've been involved in legal support for Bedouin Palestinians. The Bedouin are the only community that has returned to the places from which they were evicted in 1948. For enacting the right of return, for putting this right into practice, they have been beaten down and evicted countless times. They have brought cases to Israeli courts. Of course, Israeli courts adjudicate by adhering to Israeli laws

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that often guarantee the right of the Israeli state to evict Palestinians from their homes; fundamentally, they are mechanisms for dispossession. But I am drawn to a paradox in this example, as I am with the Joint List in the Knesset: these forums can be transformed by using them to articulate radical claims.

Supporting Palestinian rights within Israel requires a much more nuanced critical practice of measuring degrees of complicity and degrees of resistance. What interests me in this practice is the gray zone of tensions between the tactics of boycott and the general strategy of resistance, or more precisely, co-resistance toward the aim of decolonization. When those two principles contradict, one must map the situation and make a decision. And one of the important things about BDS is that it forces you to do your research, to decide what position to take in such situations.

Anti-colonial struggle can turn the tribunal into a tribunal—into a theater where the law itself is put on trial. Here I follow the great French lawyer Jacques Vergès, and the possibilities that he articulated with his theory of *rupture*. Vergès insisted on performing his legal duties during the French occupation of Algeria, within the most compromised institutional mechanisms of French colonization in Algiers, in order to turn the court into a platform where people could articulate claims that would not otherwise be heard. Gandhi and Mandela worked in a similar way. Think of Mandela's famous speech in the Pretoria Supreme Court, the highest judicial apparatus of apartheid, in which he condemns the increasingly repressive legislation of the apartheid state, which forced the ANC to take up arms, and declares that he is willing to die for the principle of a non-racial democracy.

*K.E.: How do such decisions connect to your work with Decolonizing Architecture? How does Decolonizing Architecture—a collaborative project with the architects Sandi Hilal and Alessandro Petti that has evolved into an*

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*art residency in Beit Sabour, near Bethlehem—either take up or challenge the framework of the cultural boycott?*

**E.W.:** In *Decolonizing Architecture*, we have been thinking about action vs. non-action in terms of the dilemma of Palestinian refugees. In fact, Sandi, Alessandro, and I set the practice up in part to think about the condition of refugeeness—specifically, the principle of not becoming too comfortable in a place that is not home, not making a new home, because this would normalize Israeli dispossession and surrender the right of the refugee to return home. This is a similar dilemma of engagement and collaboration.

The right of return is the most important act of decolonization; it is, in fact, *another name for decolonization*. In other words, Israel could *not* remain Israel if the right of return were granted. It would have to become another place completely—and that's the hope. Indeed, I think Palestinian return is our only hope, and the principle by which all tactics should be measured.

**K.E.:** *By naming the right of return as a decolonial act, it strikes me that you're saying it must be as transformative—as much of a rupture—as 1948 was, but in a sense that we don't yet know how to define. It involves return as an overturning—not a return to the past, but to a new collectivity.*

**E.W.:** A return is not an inversion of time. It is a creation of a new situation and a new mode of living together as equals. A return is also always a return to the urban, though ethnic cleansing has also taken place in rural areas. The urban is not just a dense concentration of buildings and people, but a complex heterogeneity and intensity of relations. And returning to it requires the subversion of the architectural fabric, so there is again an engagement with the very thing that displaced you, the very thing that oppressed you, the very thing that dispossessed you—the cities, villages, and settlements of the colonizer. It will require learning to live with your enemy. To live in the house of your enemy is a critical practice.