

ASSUMING BOYCOTT

RESISTANCE

AGENCY

CULTURAL
PRODUCTION

EDITED BY

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AND LAURA RAICOVICH



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NEOLIBERAL POLITICS, PROTECTIVE EDGE, AND BDS¹

Joshua Simon

*“Alors, comment agir sur un instrument qui vous échappe,
qui vous est adverse même?”*

—Trotskyist Michel Grandville to Jewish-German refugee
Erna Wolfgang in *Stavisky* (dir. Alain Resnais, 1974)

At this moment, neither Israelis nor Palestinians are able to bring the Israeli military occupation of Palestinian territories to an end. The corrupting influence of the ongoing occupation leaves Israeli society rationalizing apartheid and massacre as defensive tactics. The Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions (BDS) movement has emerged as a reaction to this paralysis, strategically recognizing how political agency has shifted from tax-paying citizens to external investors, debtors, and bondholders. By responding to the reality of this new, neoliberal form of sovereignty on its terms, BDS interferes with this model and reflects some of the entanglements of political activism in the context of neoliberal sovereignty.

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1.

In many ways, the question of how to operate a device that escapes you, that resists, is the question of political power, for politics is the operation of writing with a pen that is not in your hand. The epigraph above refers to a reality of power struggles in a well-organized hierarchical party formation: Trotsky's influence on Soviet politics during his exile in the mid-1930s. But our own distinct political conditions call for a reconfiguration of power and demand that we too rethink how we are to write with a pen that is not in our hands.

For the current condition of deadlock in Israel there are many reasons. As much as it is specific to the unique regime that has been established since the occupation of Palestinian territories, this condition highlights several characteristics of contemporary sovereignty models that are widespread worldwide. Today, deprived of any macro-politics through the collapse of political parties and unions, we are left with phantom political entities such as NGOs that rely primarily on funding abilities before they are able to produce structural analysis and organizational efficiency, and generate solidarity and social change.

The two predominant economic theories on the Israeli Left saw the occupation as either costing too much money or as a money-maker. The first Oslo agreement led to a brief hopeful period but as time went by it became clear it was serving military and financial elites without local input. The Oslo Accords presented an economic logic that was critiqued by Israeli scholars Jonathan Nitzan and Shimshon Bichler as a globalized New World Order based on agreements for offshoring industries and outsourcing control; according to this logic, there was much more economic potential in "peace" than in "war."² But this argument was no longer relevant by the outbreak of the second intifada in the year 2000, when it became obvious that the Israeli military-financial nexus

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relied on the occupation for its booming information technologies. Israel's economy is today largely dependent on one product: military technologies. The occupation fosters Israel's economic advantage as it becomes the justification for high-tech R&D operations, a development that has been celebrated by Dan Senor and Saul Singer³ and critiqued by Eyal Weizman.⁴

Jeff Halper of the Israeli Committee Against House Demolitions (ICAHD) has compared the occupation to the ancient Chinese game Go. He writes,

Unlike the Western game of chess, where two opponents try to “defeat” each other by taking off pieces, the aim of Go is completely different. You “win” not by defeating but by immobilizing your opponent by controlling key points on the matrix. This strategy was used effectively in Vietnam, where small forces of Viet Cong were able to pin down and virtually paralyse some half-million American soldiers possessing overwhelming firepower. In effect Israel has done the same thing to the Palestinians on the West Bank, Gaza and in East Jerusalem. Since 1967 it has put into place a matrix, similar to that of the Go board that has virtually paralysed the Palestinian population. The matrix is composed of several overlapping layers.⁵

The internal dynamics of such deadlock bring to mind a possible resolution in the form of implosion. Here the idea is basically that the Israeli government, being militarily unassailable and having silenced any opposition, will dismantle itself through the internal contradictions of its own actions. For example, the Israeli movement toward the annexation

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of Palestinian territories, which has had a strong influence on recent Israeli governments, might actually terminate the whole project of the settlements in the West Bank. As a settler society relying on constant expansion, annexation of the West Bank might mean an end to that movement and many of them becoming ghost villages. As they are so scattered, what is now their advantage in the service of land grabbing will become redundant and useless, once they all become part of one uninterrupted space in a bordered state.

2.

Examining the 2014 military assault on Gaza more closely, we recognize a model of sovereignty which, for lack of a more precise phrase, we can call neoliberal sovereignty. While escalating the targeting of civilians in Gaza and intensifying its use of firepower,⁶ Israel was operating in a seemingly contradictory manner. It initiated and accepted all ceasefire proposals throughout the fighting. This, together with the sudden withdrawal of ground troops with no clear military results, raises questions as to what exactly the fighting was about.

It seems clear that the war, though officially known as Operation Protective Edge, did not aim to ensure the security and well-being of Israelis living in towns and settlements that neighbor the Gaza Strip. It neither resulted in a decisive takeover of the Gaza Strip, nor did it help bring about an agreement with Hamas, which has governed it since 2006. In the long term, the mass killing of Palestinians effectively pushes the possibility of a negotiated peace agreement between Israelis and Palestinians at least a generation down the line. This in itself might be a reason for the settler-led Israeli government to engage in the fighting. As it sees no point in any agreement, the war is another step toward making peace an impossibility. But what could be the meaning of

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using unprecedented firepower against civilians on the one hand, while accepting repeated ceasefires on the other? The contradictory manner in which this was managed teaches us that the objective of the operation was neither defeating Hamas nor ensuring the safety of Israelis. It is the security and prosperity of another constituency that was in the minds of Israeli leadership throughout: bondholders. These are individuals, institutions, states, and corporations that have a stake in the external debt of a government. This war and the way it was waged were meant to ensure external investors that Israel would remain safe and stable. In this respect, strategically the biggest concern Israel faced was the fact that the U.S. Federal Aviation Administration suspended flights to Israel for twenty-four hours on July 22, 2014, after Hamas rockets fell near its main international airport. But the solution for investors is the problem for citizens.⁷

3.

Naomi Klein and Wendy Brown have both shown how the smooth functioning of neoliberalism, for those who benefit from it, is dependent on war and primitive accumulation. They use the terms “disaster capitalism” and “stealth revolution,” respectively.⁸ Michel Feher proposes neoliberalism as a form of governance that is different from liberal politics by that its sovereign is not tax-paying citizens but rather lenders and bondholders.⁹ For him, the advent of neoliberal sovereignty is marked by a shift from the taxpaying citizen to the bondholder. Unlike the liberal social contract theorized and at least partially implemented in Europe during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, according to which politics is shaped by the contestation and consent that takes place between citizens and governments, neoliberal politics is concerned with the power relations between a state and

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holders of its external debt. Today all governments are preoccupied with this matrix of power relations surrounding their external debt.

The realization that politics takes place between government and bondholders is shared by some boycott movements, including BDS. Mapping power relations in such a way produces a form of protest that on the level of liberal politics might be deemed withdrawal or resignation, but within the logic of neoliberal sovereignty amounts to direct political engagement. These movements are resigned to operating within the economic and political coordinates that have been determined by the power structures they ostensibly oppose. The BDS movement, for example, does not have an Israeli addressee per se—it is not addressing the Israeli government, the Israeli public, or the Israeli working class. It has already come to terms with the understanding that Israeli citizens cannot influence their government and change its policies. In this respect, the analysis that undergirds BDS is extremely poignant. BDS aims to shame and intimidate potential investors and existing ones, so that they will pull their businesses out of Israel. On an economic level, the threat of BDS is that it will cause the external debt to increase, downgrading Israel's credit ratings and making the interest it pays for its debt skyrocket. This, BDS activists believe, is the pressure the Israeli government feels it needs to answer to. Such sanctions touch neoliberal sovereignty where it really hurts. In this respect BDS is a form of neoliberal protest. It is an acute symptom of post-Oslo Palestinian dependency on the international community or, better said, individuals with international stature.

If we take this form of activism under neoliberalism further and imagine how its strategy might evolve, we see that Greece's economic crisis—including its creditors' directives for restructuring—has become the model for neoliberal sovereignty. We can envision the so-called international community arriving at the conclusion that if only international economic and financial institutions exerted absolute

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control over the external debt of Israel, they could force policies on the country from the outside. But when applied to Israel, the Greek model of neoliberal statehood might have an opposite effect than the one intended by the BDS movement, because any external debtor would want the occupation to continue. This is because Israel, like the United States or Russia, is a war-state; its means of making money depend on maintaining a state of military occupation, siege, separation, and surveillance, with regular outbreaks of war. The occupation *is* the safe investment in a state whose best business is war. Thus, any solution based on current economic conditions is itself a problem. If we accept the political rationale of the call for BDS, we therefore find ourselves facing a dilemma similar to that posed by the Oslo Accords.

In a post-Soviet world where unfettered capitalism defines the global economic structure, economic agreements, incentives, and threats are being used to impose political solutions that defy justice, prosperity, or peace. For example, the Oslo Accords, which were supposed to bring peace, were in fact a series of agreements that benefited the settler movement, construction companies, ex-military officials, and big industrialists who were able to maintain their contracts with the Israeli military as they left Israel for cheaper labor in neighboring countries, at the expense of both the Palestinian and the Israeli working class.¹⁰ In this respect, we should understand the basic assumption of political pressure for just cause through the current economic power structures of globalized capitalism not as an alternative, but rather as a variation of the logic.

4.

The Israeli Right has been so efficient in cracking down on opposition at home and abroad that its victory leaves it with no rivals. Now it has only enemies. The situation is such that for those wishing to

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act in solidarity with the Palestinians there is no available project other than to join the call for a cultural and economic boycott on Israel. As a movement, BDS relates to the activist line of engaging with politics. By that I mean that it is not a party, an organization, or a rigidly hierarchical political movement, but a movement of individuals who act directly in relation to a call for solidarity. As individuals in a neoliberal world, our main agency is consumerist. On the tactical level, boycotts may prove to be efficient (gaining media attention, getting big business to make small concessions), but on a strategic level, they have to generate a different political dynamic outside the reality of consumption as our sole agency. While liberal activism pushed for mutual-interest political action by taxpaying citizens, political struggle under neoliberal sovereignty has been converted into individual moral positions (a whole array of daily consumerist choices become our political identity). There needs to be a political project of strategizing a new formation of power. Parts of BDS already suggest new Jewish-Arab subjectivities, if mainly outside Israel-Palestine. But under the occupation, which in its current phase combines annexation with segregation, BDS reflects the tragic collapse not only of a common Jewish-Arab political project, but also of solidarity within Palestinian communities. “Gone are the days when solidarity formations worked with Palestinian communities in the diaspora, the PLO, and kindred Palestinian political parties,” write Mezna Qato and Kareem Rabie. They explain:

Instead, and in part because there is no longer a Palestinian representative body, Palestinian solidarity now almost exclusively interfaces with large civil society umbrella groups and NGOs in Palestine, and with only a few exceptions—including the

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U.S. Joint Struggle Delegation to the World Social Forum, Free Palestine in Porto Alegre, and student collaborations with other campus movements—they do not have a sufficiently direct relationship with progressive formations in Palestine or Palestinian communities in exile. Such disconnects are linked to other problems. Increasingly, the movement seems composed of constellations of well-known figures—academics, artists and poets, journalists, activists, Twitterers—who generate thinking and rhetoric that becomes associated with them as individuals. In the past, this kind of thinking was collectively deliberated and determined. Such people clearly contribute to advancing the Palestinian cause, and there is much to laud in the decentralized work of countless Palestine organizers. But the way the abundance of voices maps onto the wider strategy of public engagement here has had the unintended consequence of crowding out collective work.¹¹

5.

Occupying a similar role as the strike has in the traditions of unionism, anarcho-syndicalism, and communism, boycotts can constitute not only passive reaction but also a tactical production of actions. The hope is that the strike's strategic potential to change everything as it attains revolutionary dimensions could be obtained by BDS. Victory cannot mean partial concessions within a reality of segregation, but only radical change that generates new Jewish-Arab subjectivities. For this

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to happen we need to consider the realities of neoliberal sovereignty and not only use them, but challenge them as well. With these various problems to consider within the current condition of helplessness, the question remains: how do we act with a tool that constantly escapes us, that opposes us? How do we write with a pen that is not in our hand?