

ASSUMING BOYCOTT

RESISTANCE

AGENCY

CULTURAL
PRODUCTION

EDITED BY

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RESISTANCE, AGENCY, AND
CULTURAL PRODUCTION

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“WE,” PALESTINIANS AND JEWISH ISRAELIS: THE RIGHT NOT TO BE A PERPETRATOR¹

Ariella Azoulay

1. Who Is Called on to Boycott Israel?

The Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions (BDS) movement is a way to achieve three things: (1) to expose the mechanisms of dispossession, segregation, and legalized discrimination against Palestinians that are part of the Israeli democratic regime; (2) to publicly and internationally express solidarity with the Palestinians as a people, confronting the Israeli regime’s continuous efforts to fragment them into groups that are governed differentially within and beyond the green line; and (3) to mount pressure capable of impacting daily life for the privileged group of the governed population, i.e., Jewish Israelis, in order to radically alter the conduct of the Israeli regime or transform it altogether. A call for boycott is based on the assumption that sovereign states are actors in an international arena, and hence individuals, groups, institutions, and states can suspend their interactions with particular regimes until the justice of certain demands are recognized and adequately addressed. The

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Palestinian-led BDS movement thus aims to mobilize the international community to respond to a triple call from within that advocates: full equality for Palestinian citizens of Israel, an end to the military occupation of the Palestinian territories, and the right of Palestinians who were expelled in 1948 to return to their homes, on which more later.

The 2005 call for BDS is a way to reverse what the state of Israel has achieved since 1948—on the one hand containing “the conflict” as an internal affair between a sovereign state and its subjected population, and on the other hand determining who among the Palestinians can be “partners” for peace negotiations. Denied their rights to shape the regime or participate in its ruling apparatuses, Palestinians were thus deprived of their status as political actors both internally and internationally.

The boycott targets the Israeli regime, not Israeli citizens, unless they act as representatives of the regime. What, then, is the position of Jewish Israeli citizens with regard to this call? They may not be able to suspend their relations with the state completely, as BDS leaders themselves acknowledge. However, they can narrow them down. Occasionally, when they are able to mobilize symbolic power, they can publicly boycott particular events, prizes, and ceremonies, and avoid giving services that they are required to give. In this sense, their responses to the crimes and abuses practiced by their own regime do not come from an external position and hence do not consist of solidarity of the sort offered by citizens of other countries. Jewish Israelis are governed alongside Palestinians, and they are subjects of the same political regime; their citizenship is not external or incidental to the abuses of Palestinians under this regime, but its constitutive element. Unable to endorse the boycott from the outside, Jewish Israelis can still take part in it, and their participation, as citizens denouncing their own political regime, makes the BDS movement’s call a call to redefine the nature of their citizenship altogether.

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2. Why Call for a Boycott?

The Israeli occupation regime has governed the West Bank and Gaza through military rule that employs disastrous measures such as concentration sites and camps, blockades, destruction, dispossession, and lethal violence. “The occupation” lies at the center of the effort to mobilize people to support the boycott. When measures employed in the occupied Palestinian territories become more visible through their imprint on the bodies of the regime’s direct victims, and when these harms are associated with the Israeli regime that bears direct responsibility for their infliction, the reasons for BDS become clear and the movement gains supporters around the world. This is not a negligible achievement. Criminalizing Israel, as is well known to those who seek to expose the state’s crimes, is an extremely difficult task. The growth of the boycott movement is an indication that the filters implemented globally by the Israeli propaganda machine are no longer as effective as they used to be. Many are beginning to realize that the Israeli regime is directly responsible for the disastrous conditions under which Palestinians live.

And yet, the occupation is not the sole reason for supporting the boycott. Already in the initial 2005 call for BDS, its authors made clear that at stake is also “Palestinian people’s inalienable right to self-determination” and “[r]especting, protecting and promoting the rights of Palestinian refugees to return to their homes and properties.” It is important to note that these two rights, of self-determination and of return, are formulated differently. The first is stated as an “inalienable right” while the second is formulated more hesitantly, as a right in need of “respect, protection and promotion.” The latter statement seems to petition for the very acknowledgment of this right, rather than to demand that the entitled persons be able to freely exercise this right. The hesitant tone anticipates, based on past experience, Israel’s

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possible response to such a petition and the type of support that can be expected in the international arena, especially from other states. It is not a coincidence that these two rights are expressed differently. These are two distinct types of rights: the first reassesses the imperial policies required for the creation and maintenance of sovereign states, such as the acts of partition and deportation necessary for a people to achieve self-determination (at the expense of another people); while the second threatens to reverse the authority of sovereign states to decide who will be included in their body politic and what status they will be given. The difference between these two rights testifies to the way the civil imagination is bounded by a post-World War II consensus on the legitimacy of sovereign states constituted by differential rule.

In the years following WWII, armed Jewish forces in Palestine devised and embraced imperial measures that formed a part of policies aimed at implementing a “new world order” in and beyond Europe. Those policies, such as partition, massacres, deportation, destruction, and looting, helped to construct a body politic in which the most populous group—Palestinians—became an exception to the rule, that of Jewish self-determination. Though the numbers are widely known, it is still important to mention them. With the foundation of the state of Israel in 1948, 750,000 Palestinians were expelled and the remaining 150,000 became a minority. Meanwhile, almost 700,000 Jewish refugees and immigrants, most of whom were oblivious to both the scope of destruction that preceded their arrival and the fabric of the mixed society that had lived there before 1948, nothing of which remained after they arrived, were incorporated into the new nation-state. These immigrants were immediately recruited to partake in the war against the “enemy,” whose identity was intentionally blurred. The “enemy” was a result of the conflation of the British colonial power with “Arab armies” and the local Palestinian population. Thanks to this deception, the neocolonialism

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pursued by the nascent state of Israel could pass as anti-imperial struggle and provoke international support.

The destruction of Palestine as a mixed society involved the expulsion of the majority of Palestinians, the dispossession of their property, and the refusal to allow their return. Those expelled were confined to sites and concentration zones (“refugee camps,” ghettos within cities such as Jaffa, Ramleh, and Lydda, and geographical regions such as “the triangle” and zones of the West Bank and Gaza Strip), many of which still exist today. There, for years to come, those expelled were exposed to the accumulating consequences of a regime-made disaster. The constant refusal to allow their return, which has been reaffirmed by every Israeli government since the state’s foundation, makes Israeli Jews both preservers of the consequences of crimes committed when the country was founded and perpetrators of new crimes. Under the emergency regulations that have not been revoked since 1948, and whose purpose has been to maintain the principle of differential rule, to be a good citizen means being involved, in more or less direct ways, more or less enthusiastically, in exercising the violence necessary to maintain this principle. Therefore, from the point of view of an Israeli citizen, the call for boycott can also be the beginning of the recognition of a right that Israeli Jews have been consistently deprived of: the right not to be perpetrators.

The crimes that justify the boycott of Israel, crimes perpetrated against the Palestinians, are not just crimes against Palestinians but, to use Hannah Arendt’s expression, crimes against humanity.² Stopping crimes against humanity and addressing the plight of their victims, providing reparations, and inventing forms of compensation should not remain the interest of Palestinians alone. These should be, first and foremost, the obligations and interests of Israeli Jews and the Jewish community worldwide, of all those who were implicated in committing

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and perpetuating these crimes, all those who—by collaborating with the political regimes that have ordered the crimes, refused to acknowledge them, and spread misinformation about them—have been deprived of their inalienable right not to be perpetrators.

Since the institution of popular sovereignty in the eighteenth century, and more intensely in the wake of WWII, with the consolidation of an international system of sovereignties based on mutual protection (often against their own governed populations), the “inalienable right of self-determination” has been the most sacred right protected by sovereign states. The recent recognition of a Palestinian state by several European parliaments, including that of the European Union, even before such a state has been established and without any significant changes in the lives of its inhabitants or reparations for past crimes, is symptomatic of this pact among sovereign nation-states. The return of those expelled, on the other hand, is somewhat like a Pandora’s box for sovereign states, many of which would refrain from endorsing such a demand for fear of exposing themselves to a *tu quoque* objection. The qualified formulation of the right of return in the BDS movement’s foundational statement betrays a tacit acknowledgement of this pact among sovereign nation-states and shows how this pact limits what the movement knows it can expect from the Israeli regime—if, that is, Israel is ever ready to comply with some of the BDS movement’s demands. This is, again, symptomatic of the power that the Israeli regime has acquired since it was founded on the ruins of Palestine and the mixed society that lived there.

The right of self-determination foregrounded by the BDS movement is a particular form of rule that was invented in the late eighteenth century by imperial powers through the American and French revolutions and was proposed to colonized peoples against whom crimes were committed. In the name of this right, regime-made disasters spread across the world. Crimes were committed in Palestine

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in the name of Jews' right to self-determination, a right that was recognized by the UN General Assembly in 1948.³ These crimes require absolution: Palestinians' place in an undifferentiated body politic should be acknowledged, and Israelis should be free to exercise their right not to become or remain perpetrators. The return of those expelled and the liberation of Israeli Jews from their role as perpetrators are linked and can be achieved only through processes of undoing this regime-made disaster rather than through more partitions, transfer, and cleansing.

3. What Makes a Civil "We" Possible?

The citizen-perpetrator is not only a particular kind of perpetrator but also a particular kind of citizen. Distinct from those high up in the state hierarchy, who plan and order the crimes, and unlike the "thoughtless" Nazi perpetrator described by Arendt,⁴ citizen-perpetrators are deprived of the choice not to be perpetrators. For the most part, they act within the capillaries of regime-made disaster and, hence, may at best alleviate the plight of Palestinians, be "more humane" or generous toward the Palestinians in different spheres of life. Even refusal to serve in the army, which few exercise, does not spare them the role of citizen-perpetrator they automatically reassume as soon as they are released from jail. Nothing short of a complete transformation of the principle that organizes the body politic can spare them from assuming this role. Studying the conditions of citizen-perpetrators within a regime based on differential rule, and understanding these conditions as part of the disaster, is a first step toward recognizing the disaster as inseparable from the political regime that generates it.

Implicit complicity with the reproduction of the regime awaits every newborn Israeli Jew. Her situation is not very different from that

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of the new Jewish immigrants of the late 1940s, thrown into a situation construed as an “existential war” in which they had to do their share in order to become good citizens. True, enough information about the disaster has always been available, but always in bits and pieces—and always mingled with lies. People could have known that this or that war they were recruited to fight was not really a war of “no choice” and that they did not fight for their very existence. More generally, people could have known that crimes had been committed, that Palestinians had been wronged, that they were made into enemies and not born so, and that the Israelis were constructed as natives in order to make the political regime appear as a *fait accompli*. However, assembling the numerous pieces of the puzzle into a coherent picture, while this fragmented information is almost always distorted, concealed, and scattered, framed as part of a story of “nation building” or as another response to “existential threat,” and buried under lies and misleading axioms, is as difficult as it is to persuade people to support the boycott. It takes a lot of time and some civic courage to invest political structures and situations with meanings that would counter those produced by the state. It takes more than a few individuals to propagate *as crimes against humanity* deeds that were originally made to appear as natural and necessary acts of self-defense.

The ongoing catastrophe visited upon Palestinians is inseparable not only from the structure of the Israeli regime and its system of citizenship but also from the fact that the very nature of this regime remains concealed from most Jewish Israelis, who take the differential rule at its foundation as either natural (in “Israel proper”) or temporary (in the occupied territories) and cannot understand that—or why—their regime should be dismantled. This collective blindness is an essential aspect of the catastrophe, produced and distributed along the dividing lines of the differential body politic in Israel-Palestine, and is what makes it a regime-made disaster. This disaster is constitutive

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of the regime, not incidental to its functioning, and contributes to its self-preservation. Most Jewish Israelis do not perceive themselves as perpetrators and do not recognize their regime as one whose end is long overdue; at the same time, conflating the state, the regime, and the people, they perceive calls to dismantle their regime as calls to destroy their country and annihilate its Jewish population. Today, Jewish citizens comprise no more than 52 percent of the governed population in Israel-Palestine. The unreserved support for and unconditional legitimization of differential rule by this group is necessary for the perpetuation of the Israeli regime.

In a decades-long process, the Israeli regime has succeeded in making it almost impossible either to imagine civil life in Israel-Palestine or to recognize the common history of Jews and Palestinians as a point of departure for any process of Palestinian reparation. The engaging call of the BDS movement—“Let us harness solidarity into forms of action that can end international support for Israel’s crimes”—should be understood as addressed to the international community. Israelis cannot allow themselves the luxury of solidarity, as if the struggle to overthrow the Israeli regime and the history of almost seven decades of regime-made disaster is a Palestinian cause they support from the outside. Israeli Jews should engage in the BDS movement’s call, but they should also do much more. It is their duty to start imagining new forms of partnership devoid of any claim for Jewish supremacy, working to recover pre-1948 modes of civil coexistence, which had not yet been nationalized, and which many of their ancestors opted for at the time.

They should do this not because the BDS movement requires or even welcomes such shared effort and common work of political imagination. Regretfully, it does not. The movement was initiated by Palestinians, in the name of Palestinians, and for the Palestinian cause, as if dismantling a regime-made disaster should be the onus of

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its direct victims alone. To the contrary, it is only through shared work by Israelis and Palestinians toward a total transformation of the regime under which they have been ruled together as perpetrators and victims that a fertile common ground can reemerge. That said, Palestinians cannot be blamed for not seeking Israelis as partners and collaborators. For decades, they have been deceived by Israeli Zionists who presented themselves as leftists but didn't acknowledge the Nakba, and continued to support the Israeli regime's militaristic logic and principle of differential rule, while rejecting expelled Palestinians' right of return.

Acknowledging the Nakba is a prerequisite to join the BDS movement, but it cannot be enough for Israeli Jews. The destruction of pre-1948 Palestine should concern them not only as a problem of or a catastrophe for the Palestinians, but also as a *crime against humanity* for which they bear responsibility. Hence, in recognizing Palestinian rights, they should also supplement them with a right of their own—the right not to be perpetrators, the right to refuse to inhabit the position allocated to them by the Israeli regime. In the context of this regime, under which Jewish responsibility for the destruction of Palestine and the perpetuation of the catastrophe is still widely denied by many Jews, the universal value of the right not to be a perpetrator can be acknowledged today mainly by Palestinians and within the BDS movement. This universal right should be at the foundation of a different civil contract, which would emerge through a process of catastrophe reversal, including recognizing and promoting the right to return and reparations. Such common work on reversing the outcome of the catastrophe should include the inalienable right of all citizens to refuse to become perpetrators. This right could serve as the foundation of a new Palestinian-Jewish partnership. On this basis, a civil “we” might finally be uttered again.