The Ideological Foundations of the Boycott Campaign Against Israel

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Recent discussion regarding the ideological basis for a boycott of Israel, whether in academia or in response to the campaign for the Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions (BDS) forcefully promoted by a network of Palestinian and international NGOs, has concentrated upon two interrelated issues: first, the thematic overlap between anti-Zionism and anti-Semitism; and secondly, the emergence of the left as the principal driver of anti-Zionist discourse in Western democracies.

This focus should not convey the impression that contemporary anti-Semitism is reducible only to anti-Zionism, nor that malign notions about the Jewish people are the sole preserve of the left. Anti-Semitism in its classic form—that is, hatred of Jews largely unrelated to the existence or actions of the Jewish state and rooted in national-religious prejudice—persists in many countries, particularly in Eastern Europe and the republics of the former Soviet Union. Political currents outside the left, most obviously on the extreme right, as well as among the various strains of Islamism, remain ideologically wedded to classic anti-Semitism and incorporate anti-Zionism on that basis.

It is equally true that the extremes of left and right identify increasingly with the portrait of Jewish power as global, transcendental, and unaccountable; that they use the terms "Jew" and "Zionist" interchangeably; and that they admiringly regard Islamism as the primary source of opposition to American and

"Zionist" ambitions in the Middle East and, by extension, the world. However, such mirroring cannot explain and should not obscure the distinctive character of much of the current left discourse on Israel. Indeed, to classify this discourse as simply an instance of extremism is to ignore that its most disturbing aspect—the insistence that Jewish state be quarantined as a necessary step toward its eventual elimination—has penetrated the mainstream of political debate and exchange.

What needs to be interrogated, therefore, is the set of ideas that underlie the boycott movement as well as their appeal, both actual and potential. What unifies these ideas is a grand strategy of delegitimization that highlights elements of theory and ideology, history and comparative politics. In opposing the existence of a Jewish state, the boycott movement remains faithful to the long-held opposition of many left-wing ideologues toward Jews asserting themselves as an identifiable, autonomous collective. In advocating the economic, cultural, and political isolation of Israel, the boycott movement borrows from multiple historical legacies, notably the state policy of anti-Semitism, formally presented as anti-Zionism, practiced in the Soviet Union, as well as the Arab League's three-tier economic boycott of Israel (namely, the boycott of Israeli companies, of companies that engage in business with Israel, and of companies that engage in business with companies engaged in business with Israel). Finally, in demonizing Israel by comparing it with the former apartheid regime in South Africa—a grave deceit that is a core concern of this paper—the boycott movement seeks to force Israel to abandon, internally, its Jewish character and, externally, its sovereignty.

The Left's Opposition to Jewish Self-Determination

It is this entrenched opposition to Jewish self-determination—in an age, no less, when progressives celebrate the identity politics of marginal, disempowered groups—that has led to the charge of anti-Semitism being leveled at much of the left. This is commonly and angrily refuted with the counterclaim that opposition to a state is radically different from hatred of an entire people. But what such a response

ignores is the moral flimsiness of a position in which only Israel, out of nearly two hundred states in the international system, is selected for dissolution, and the disregard for the impact such a catastrophe would have upon Jews both inside and outside the Jewish state.

As I have argued elsewhere,[1] this position mirrors the disdain with which Jewish concerns have historically been regarded by a large section of the left. This was as true of the period before the emergence of political Zionism as it was after. In its pre-Zionist phase, left-wing anti-Semitism had a decidedly economic thrust. For example, Karl Marx's best-known comments about Jews and Judaism were spiced with crude anti-Semitic language about "huckstering" and "haggling." This characterization of Judaism as a metaphor for capitalism can be found in his 1843 response to Bruno Bauer, "On the Jewish Question." Although Marx actually challenges Bauer's opposition to Jewish emancipation, the overriding thrust of his thesis is that Judaism is identified with an economy based upon monetary exchange and private property. Outside of these parameters, Marx cannot conceive of a space for Jewish existence. Hence his conclusion, "The social emancipation of the Jew is the emancipation of society from Judaism."[2]

To the extent that all group identities are constructed around narratives of history or religion or culture, they can be characterized as synthetic or even artificial. Yet for much of the left in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the objectionable nature of Jewish identity, in contrast to the identities of other groups, stemmed from its artificiality, which was understood as being economic in origin. Agents of a monetary economy could not constitute a community, much less a nationality: hence the equation of Jewish emancipation with Jewish disappearance, as intimated by Marx. These views partly explain the contempt that marked the exchanges of so many revolutionaries on the perennial "Jewish question." Rosa Luxemburg, herself a Jew, put it baldly in one of her private letters: "Why do you come to me with your special Jewish sorrows? I feel just as sorry for the wretched Indian victims in Putumayo, the Negroes in Africa.... I cannot find a special corner in my heart for the ghetto."[3]

What is supremely ironic is that the contemporary revivers of this negationist approach—those who insist that Zionism represents a surrender to anti-Semitism, who go on to claim that anti-Semitism is simply a rhetorical trick to muzzle criticism of the State of Israel, who grudgingly concede that Jewish identity may have, after all, a valid religious component, but stringently reject anything beyond that—present their approach as the key to making Jewish communities secure. From a Jewish perspective, such a position is transparently dishonest. Isaac Deutscher, the Jewish Marxist historian, cogently summarized why in a 1954 interview in which he explained that his original opposition to Zionism "was based on a confidence in the European labor movement, or, more broadly, in European society and civilization, which that society and civilization have not justified."[4]

Would such confidence be justified now? It is true that Jews living in postwar Europe have known an unprecedented degree of security, underpinned by a range of tangible factors, from robust laws combating anti-Semitism to educational programs promoting tolerance and awareness of Jewish history. However, security is not guaranteed by structural measures alone. Since the eruption of the second Palestinian intifada in September 2000, European Jews have undergone a security crisis without parallel in the post-1945 period. In part, this is because of a dramatic increase in anti-Jewish incidents recorded in nearly every European state, intimately related to the troughs and peaks of conflict in the Middle East. But it is also the product of an discursive environment of discourse in which Israel is often portrayed, in general terms, as a rogue state and, in specific terms, as a reincarnation of the one state to have most outraged the liberal conscience in recent memory—apartheid South Africa.

Herein lies the paradox. The existence of the State of Israel has been a critical pillar supporting the greater sense of security and confidence that Jews in Europe and elsewhere have enjoyed in the years following the Holocaust. Despite that, they are told by anti-Zionists that the State of Israel is a critical source of *insecurity*, for

themselves and for the world. In other words, they are told that the principal source of contemporary Jewish misfortune, as well as a primary cause of injustice and disorder in international society, is the Jewish state.

In his seminal essay, *Anti-Semite and Jew*,[5] Jean-Paul Sartre provided a description of an abstracted, idealized type closely associated with this convoluted reasoning. Rather provocatively, he named this type the "democrat." In framing the problem, Sartre observed: "The anti-Semite reproaches the Jew with being Jewish; the democrat reproaches him with willfully considering himself a Jew."

The "democrat" is a "feeble" protector of Jews, argued Sartre, because while those Jews who discard their Jewish identity acquire a nobility in the eyes of the democrat, those who embrace their identity are by definition a danger, to themselves and to others. The "democrat" in Sartre's essay warns us: "The Jews will come back from exile with such insolence and hunger for vengeance that I am afraid of a new outburst of anti-Semitism."

Such "insolence" may be said to have taken the form of the State of Israel and is what lies behind the ire of today's "democrats." For them, Israel exemplifies the refusal of most Jews to respond to their newly-permissive environments by disappearing, as well as their apparent stubbornness in clinging to the anachronism of the nation-state (especially when their dubious claim to nationality has been indulged at the expense of a genuine nation that has been both colonized and dispossessed). Thus are the historical consistencies of left-wing anti-Semitism demonstrated; so, too, is the ostensibly precise boundary between anti-Zionism and anti-Semitism torn down.

Two Stages in the Evolution of Left-Wing Anti-Semitism

In broad terms, then, one can distinguish two stages in the evolution of left-wing anti-Semitism. The first predates Zionism, is rooted in the critique of capitalism, and is typified by Marx. The second coincides with the emergence of Zionism and the opposition to Zionism, is rooted in an anti-imperialist paradigm, and is typified

by Sartre's "democrat." It is in this second stage, in which Zionism as a movement is regarded as a harmful force on a global scale and the State of Israel is portrayed as a foreign body inserted into the heart of the Arab homeland, that the origins of the apartheid analogy can be discerned.

The notion of Zionism as a global threat to colonized nations and as a strategic tool of empire was enthusiastically embraced by the New Left in the 1960s. Given the anti-Stalinist orientation of much of the New Left, it is striking that the representation of Zionism which was so readily adopted was, in fact, a Soviet creation— one, moreover, that was entirely predictable, given the active promotion of anti-Semitism in the USSR in the wake of the Doctors' Plot of 1948 and the associated campaign against "rootless cosmopolitans." What the Soviet pamphlets demonized as "international Zionism" was a fusion of czarist-era anti-Semitism with the anti-imperialist bluster of the Soviet regime.

In that regard, two distinctly Soviet libels stand out, both of which still claim adherents on the contemporary left. The first concerns the Holocaust. Soviet revisionists engaged, not in the denial of the extermination itself, but in the transfer of responsibility for the extermination. The Zionist movement was accused of collaborating with the Nazis in the implementation of the Final Solution to such a degree that the Holocaust became "the autogenocide of the Twentieth Century."[6] This ugly distortion was echoed in parts of the Western left, most famously in the form of a play entitled *Perdition*, which almost came to the London stage in the 1980s and remains in active circulation among anti-Zionists today. Based on the 1954 libel trial in Israel involving Rudolf Kastner, who had been accused of collaborating with the Nazis in order to rescue Jews in occupied Hungary, *Perdition* was, in the words of its late author, Jim Allen, a tale of "privileged Jewish leaders" collaborating "in the extermination of their own kind in order to help bring about a Zionist state, Israel, a state which itself is racist."

The second libel concerns the insidious essence of Judaism and, flowing from that, the global reach of Jewish and Zionist influence.

The writings on Zionism churned out by the Soviet state apparatus, camouflaged as social science, portrayed the movement as an organic outgrowth of Judaism's racist doctrines, notably the concept of the "Chosen People." Although the Soviets developed and popularized this inversion of Jewish theology, one does not have to delve into Soviet archives to find examples of it. During the conflict between Israel and Hezbollah in July 2006, the Norwegian newspaper *Aftenposten* published an article by Jostein Gaarder,[7] a popular Norwegian author, alleging that Israel's military actions in Lebanon were a demonstration of the conceit and hubris that comes with the status of "Chosen People." From the Soviet Union's standpoint, this notion of chosenness elevated Zionism into a transnational foe, along with "racism," "imperialism," and "militarism." Standing in its way, however, were the peoples of Africa, the Arab states, Asia, and Latin America.

The Apartheid Analogy

The delegitimization strategy waged against Israel today, and particularly its apartheid component, owes much to the Soviet Union. As the international campaign against Israel waged by states aligned with the Soviet Union, as well as among the Non-Aligned Movement, escalated during the 1970s, the apartheid analogy came into play. The clearest example of this was Resolution 3379, passed by the UN General Assembly in 1975 with active Soviet encouragement, which categorized Zionism as a form of racism. The resolution also assisted in the creation of a dedicated Palestine bureaucracy within the UN secretariat.

Resolution 3379 was significant in that it punctured the Westphalian norms underlying the UN Charter, particularly regarding the sovereign equality of states, through its incorporation of the key tropes of Soviet anti-Zionism. By bracketing Zionism with apartheid and racism, the resolution effectively said that Israel was less of a state and more of a toxic growth within the international system. In its preamble, the resolution approvingly noted "...resolution 77 (XII) adopted by the Assembly of Heads of State and Gov-

ernment of the Organization of African Unity at its twelfth ordinary session, held at Kampala from 28 July to 1 August 1975, which considered 'that the racist regime in occupied Palestine and the racist regime in Zimbabwe and South Africa have a common imperialist origin, forming a whole and having the same racist structure and being organically linked in their policy aimed at repression of the dignity and integrity of the human being.'" The Kampala formulation strongly reflected both the imperatives of Soviet policy (its domestic anti-Semitism and its embrace of the Arab cause abroad) and the anti-colonialist idiom used to express that policy.

Indeed, 1975 also saw the publication of Valery Skurlatov's notorious tome *Zionism and Apartheid*, by the state-run *Politizadat* publishers in Ukraine.[8] Transparently anti-Semitic in substance and tone, Skurlatov's work expounded on the "organic link" referred to in the Kampala formulation: "Racial biological doctrines, according to which people are divided into 'chosen people' and *goyim*, have been turned into official ideology and state policy in Israel and South Africa, where the 'inferior' are forcibly separated from the 'superior.' That is what apartheid is." In a shrill conclusion, Skurlatov claimed that in their "death agony," both Zionism and apartheid had adopted Nazi Germany's propensity for "adventurism": "This is why the world's attention now focuses on apartheid and Zionism; their secrets have become known, and the nations have discovered the abominable essence of the 'God-chosen.'"

Given that the apartheid analogy was a favorite theme of Soviet incitement against Jews, its persistence in the post-Soviet era is alarming, as is the apparent indifference shown by its current advocates to its totalitarian provenance. What the current advocates have in common with their Soviet precursors is their invocation of the word "apartheid" as part of a strategy to secure Israel's isolation and reverse its international legitimacy; at the same time, their version strives for greater respectability, insofar as it has largely been purged of the nakedly anti-Semitic foundations upon which the Soviet anti-Zionists based themselves. Instead, the concentration is on the supposed similarities between apartheid and Zionism in terms of state

structure and government policy. This shift is one reason why the apartheid analogy has been able to slip from the margins into mainstream discourse in the West.

This does not make the analogy any more acceptable. In essence, the apartheid analogy remains a slander, one found all over: in the Iranian press; on Arab satellite television channels; in the academic boycott motions submitted to British academic unions in 2005, 2006, and 2007; in the boycott resolution passed by the representatives of the Sor Trondelag regional parliament in Norway in 2005 (and revoked in 2006); and, most importantly, in the corridors of the United Nations, where many officials still behave as though Resolution 3379, revoked in a curt single-line resolution in 1991, is still on the books. The UN continues to sponsor conferences and meetings, such as the World Conference Against Racism in Durban in 2001, that are little more than excuses to pile opprobrium upon Israel.[9] For many, the definition dictates the solution: Pregnant within the accusation that the State of Israel practices apartheid is the recommendation for Israel's termination.

Distorting the Meaning of Apartheid

One lamentable feature of the present debate is that precious little effort is expended on recalling what apartheid in South Africa actually constituted. Therefore, when applied to Israel, the analogy is, at best, a careless and hasty attempt to graft the structure of one state onto another, simply because tensions and divisions over citizenship, land use, and access to services are a fact of life in Israel (as they are in other multiethnic societies). At worst, it represents the transformation of the word "apartheid" into a sheer pejorative term, removed from its southern African context and stripped of its close historical linkage with Afrikaner nationalism.

What, then, did apartheid involve? In the first instance, apartheid involved the enforced domination of the ruling minority belonging to one group over the oppressed majority belonging to another group. In South Africa, 90 percent of the population was composed of nonwhites disenfranchised and deprived of fundamen-

tal rights. Such a system of governance has its parallels in the Middle East, but they are not to be found in Israel. The spectacle of minorities ruling over majorities is a common one in the Arab world: in Ba'athist Syria, where the Alawis have long been dominant despite a Sunni majority; in Bahrain, where the Shi'a majority is ruled by a Sunni minority; or, until recently, in Ba'athist Iraq, where Saddam Hussein's dictatorship concentrated Sunni Arabs from the Tikrit region in positions of power. Yet even in these cases, where repressive and authoritarian states have been appropriated by minorities, the analogy with apartheid is inept—unless, of course, the purpose is merely to employ the word "apartheid" as a term of abuse.

What made the apartheid system in South Africa peculiar was the manner in which racism was enshrined in law. The only credible parallel would be Nazi Germany following the promulgation of the Nuremburg Laws. Just as the Nazis legally degraded Germany's Jewish citizens, the legislators of apartheid South Africa passed a matrix of laws and regulations that imposed a hellish form of discrimination on the nonwhite majority. Through such measures as the Group Areas Act (1950), the Bantu Education Act (1953), the Reservation of Separate Amenities Act (1953), the Suppression of Communism Act (1950), and the Prohibition of Mixed Marriages Act (1949), the apartheid regime micromanaged the lives of its subjects on the basis of their skin color. Under apartheid, it was the law that determined where blacks could live, what they could (or more precisely, could not) study, which seats they could occupy on public transport, what they could (or could not) speak and write, with whom they could (or could not) share a bed or marry.

Therefore, it follows that if apartheid is understood as the rule of racist law, any comparison with Israel—or any other country—needs to begin at the point of the law. Even a cursory examination of Israeli law reveals an explicit commitment to the principle of the equality of all citizens, regardless of background. On that basis alone, there is no rational foundation for the apartheid analogy.

At the same time, the apartheid analogy has evolved in terms of focus and substance. Perhaps mindful that the comparison with the legal culture and practices of the State of Israel undermines rather than supports their case, some advocates of the apartheid analogy—most notably the former U.S. president, Jimmy Carter[10]—base their approach on an analysis of Israel's land policies in the Palestinian territories. From this standpoint, apartheid is interpreted as the state managing land conflicts between competing groups in an inequitable fashion, with resulting human rights violations, as opposed to a discriminatory legal framework regulating citizenship and human rights.

This shift in emphasis begs an obvious question that leads, in turn, to other questions. If the fundamental features of South African apartheid are absent, then why use the term? Is the implication that land policies are the crux of the matter, rather than, say, the denial of voting rights to a vast swathe of the population? And if that were the case, why was the key demand of the anti-apartheid movement in South Africa expressed as "one person, one vote"?

We will return to these issues shortly, by way of the delegitimization strategy, but first let's examine this revised apartheid analogy on its own terms. In essence, Israel stands accused of reviving the bantustan policy of the apartheid regime in the Palestinian territories. In fact, some detractors, such as UN official John Dugard,[11] assert that Israel's offenses "surpass those" of South Africa, but these claims do not hold up under scrutiny. Devised in the 1940s, the concept of the bantustans, separate "homelands" for blacks, was intrinsic to the racist culture of the apartheid regime and its prescription of separate (and unequal) development for different racial groups. By the 1970s the poverty-stricken bantustans were home to nearly four million blacks, many of whom were forcibly deported and deprived of their South African citizenship. Starved of resources and entirely dependent on the apartheid regime (since the absence of international recognition meant that international aid was not available), the bantustans were nonetheless touted as a permanent solution for South Africa's black population. By transferring the black population in its entirety to the bantustans, the architects of apartheid intended to make sure that pressure for majority rule never reached critical mass.

Applying the charge of "bantustanization" to Israel assumes that Israel's presence in the Palestinian territories is permanent and that it is therefore parceling up the land accordingly—hence the portrayal of the Jewish settler movement as an arm of the state. However, the policies of successive Israeli governments over the last decade have, if anything, indicated the temporary nature of Israel's control over the Palestinian areas. Israel has disengaged fully from Gaza and from outlying regions of the West Bank and has made clear its willingness to consider land swaps in any final status negotiations.

On this critical point, the bantustan comparison is found wanting, much as it is in other significant areas. There is, for example, no government policy to forcibly deport Arab citizens of Israel to the Palestinian territories. Nor has the Palestinian Authority been hampered by a lack of international legal personality, as was the case with the bantustans. To the contrary, the PA is near universally regarded, including by Israel, as a state-in-the-making; as a result, it has received billions of dollars in international aid and assistance since its creation. Were the PA really a bantustan, international policy would be to undermine it, so as not to compromise with a creature of apartheid. Instead, policy has oriented toward strengthening and stabilizing the PA.

In sum, the apartheid regime and its bantustans were the product of the application of racist doctrines in law. By any reasonable assessment, neither these doctrines nor such laws can be discerned in the Israeli context. What can be discerned is precisely that which makes Israel unremarkable among multiethnic nations: the fact that complaints of discrimination frequently emerge from the Arab minority, as well as from segments of its Jewish populace. This is not to make light of discrimination nor to claim that Israel's state institutions have always responded to these legitimate concerns with the necessary sensitivity. The overriding point here is that discrimination, however disturbing, is manifestly not the same as apartheid.

The Agenda of Delegitimization

In the same way that the boycott movement frequently abuses the history and meaning of the word "Holocaust," so does it distort the word "apartheid." This comparison is not the result of any rigorous analysis. It is about twisting historically-specific meanings to serve the agenda of delegitimization. This requires that the word "apartheid" be deliberately reserved for Israel, to underline its illegitimacy. There are plenty of other democracies where discrimination is a fact of life; look, for example, at the treatment of the Roma and Sinti (Gypsy) peoples in the new democracies of Eastern Europe. Yet the Czech Republic is not described as an apartheid state. Hungary is not the target of a boycott.

The thesis that Israel resembles apartheid South Africa is a fiction. Moreover, it is a fiction that is politically necessary to preserve the fundamental aim of the boycott movement: not the withdrawal of Israel to the 1967 lines, but its dissolution as a sovereign state. Of course, this is not to suggest that every person who advocates a boycott of Israel necessarily supports this goal, but it is the goal of those who have created the boycott movement and who set its agenda and priorities. It is a goal that is consistent with the broad trajectory described here, which sees in the persistence of Jews and Jewish identity an abnormality and which seeks to eradicate the foundations—territorial, cultural, political—for a conscious, self-defining Jewish existence in Israel and the Diaspora.

Footnotes

1. Ben Cohen, "The Persistence of Anti-Semitism on the British Left," *Jewish Political Studies Review* 16:3-4 (Fall 2004).

2. Karl Marx, "On the Jewish Question," in *Selected Essays* (New York: International Publishers, 1926), p. 97.

3. Quoted in Walter Laqueur, *A History of Zionism* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1992), p. 435.

4. Isaac Deutscher, "Israel's Spiritual Climate," in *The Non-Jewish Jew* (London: Merlin Press, 1981), pp. 126-52.

5. Jean-Paul Sartre, *Anti-Semite and Jew* (New York: Schocken Books, 1948), p. 58.

6. W. D. Rubinstein, *The Left, The Right and the Jews* (London: Croom Helm, 1982), p. 115.

7. Jostein Gaarder, "God's Chosen People," *Aftenposten*, 5 August 2006.

8. Theodore Freedman (ed.), *Anti-Semitism in the Soviet Union: Its Roots and Consequences* (New York: Anti-Defamation League, 1984), pp. 583-87.

9. For further discussion, see Ben Cohen, "The Right To Exist: Anti-Zionism at the United Nations," *Engage Journal*, January 2006, available at http://www.engageonline.org.uk/journal/index.php?journal_id=5&article_id=16.

10. Jimmy Carter, *Palestine: Peace Not Apartheid* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2006).

11. John Dugard, "Israelis Adopt What South Africa Dropped," *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, 29 November 2006.

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