

Traumatic Memories and the Need to Punish: the Boycott of Israeli Academics

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I. Introduction

This essay explores the signifying discourses used to support the proposed boycott of Israeli academics and researchers.¹ Particular emphasis is placed on understanding the links between the political and the personal, through an exploration of the emotional basis for supporting the boycott and the power of ideological language in splitting thoughts from affects. The original support for the boycott by the British Teachers Union in 2002 was to prevent British universities from collaborating with Israeli universities and research scholars. It started with the aim of applying political pressure to the Israeli State regarding withdrawal from the occupied territories. Unless Israeli universities and academics actively recanted/confessed or criticized the Israeli State, they were collaborating in the oppression of the Palestinians—a form of guilt by association—and should be subjected to the boycott.² Ironically, universities provided a context for the expression of ideas and feelings (hate, despair, disappointment, guilt) of boycott supporters at the expense of other colleagues with whom they de-identified and wanted to discipline and punish. The campaign for the boycott has created deep divisions within the left, each camp resorting to attacks, counterattacks, and mutual

¹ An earlier version of this article was published on the Web site ENGAGE, February 2007, Issue 4:1–12. Available at <http://www.Engageonline.org.uk>

² For a detailed history of the boycott and the argument pro and against, see the articles in *Engage Forum* under the editorship of David Hirsh. At <http://www.Engageonline.org.uk>

condemnations.³ Key to this battle was the way “academic freedom” became politicized from the start. The supporters of the boycott argued that academic freedom was a bourgeois capitalistic idea that should not take precedent over other forms of freedom, such as freedom from hunger or persecution. Freedom of speech was as a cover-up that legitimized other forms of control and oppression. In the words of Omar Barghouti, a boycott supporter:

Freedom to produce and exchange knowledge and ideas [is deemed] sacrosanct regardless of the prevailing conditions. There are two key faults in this argument. It is inherently biased because it only regards as worthy the academic freedom of Israelis. The fact that Palestinians are denied basic rights as well as academic freedom due to Israel’s military occupation is lost in parroting it. (Reported by Alex Stein in *Engage Forum* [October 18, 2007]:1–4)

I have been puzzled by the willingness of some academics, close friends of mine among them, to support the proposed ban of Israeli academics and researchers. I was equally surprised by the backlash it has created and the fear of anti-Semitism it has unleashed (Alexander and Bogdanor, 2006). Like many on the left, I have a desire for a just solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the end of Palestinian suffering and occupation. Writing as a left-wing Jewish academic with connections to Israeli universities, this essay is a way to make sense of a situation that offended my professional identity and political commitment. Using a psychoanalytic lens, I analyzed

³ The use of the term “left” is of course problematic, since there are many groups on the left with differing visions and histories. In this paper, the term “left” will be used as an umbrella term; “radical left” is used to denote individuals who support the boycott.

published arguments supporting the boycott and interviewed eighteen left-wing academics. By writing this essay, I hope to reach out and open lines of communication, however limited and disappointing, with individuals who feel so differently about the boycott and its effects on Israeli-Palestinian relations.

Israeli academics and researchers are more likely than any other group to be politically on the left, to seek change in Israeli society and find a fair solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Why then would the boycott be directed against them rather than against purely economic or political targets? A partial answer to this question comes from boycott supporters' view of Israeli universities. For them, universities are viewed as representatives of bourgeois (colonial) mentality, supported by a Zionist ideology, existing on State money, and working in collaboration with the military, thus making them a legitimate target of attack. Universities are also soft targets in the sense that there is little risk of retaliation, and academia provides fertile political and psychological grounds for manipulation of affects.

In this essay, my concern is twofold. I am concerned with the processes of de-linking, whereby the affective dimension relevant to the situation is denied or not fully acknowledged in the political arguments made in support of the boycott—a boycott whose unconscious effects involve emotional manipulation. A second concern stems from the role of social contagion, what Masumi (2005) refers to as “agglutinative affect.” Clichéd political formulations, detached from specific historical contexts, eventually spread to other political situations, which have their own unassimilated fears and emotional agendas. The reactions to these mechanisms are likely to be shaped by feelings

that are redirected inward (self-hate) and/or projected onto selected outer and marginalized groups (Freud, 1922).⁴

The “success” of the boycott in attracting supporters in a number of countries can be understood from a psychodynamic point of view through an analysis of empathy, connectedness, and identification/disidentification with an “Other.” Because support for the boycott touches on many unconscious feelings of fear, guilt, and shame, it is important to understand how emotional and cognitive dynamics are shaped by ideological discourses based on paranoid, humanistic, and utopian thinking. These discourses will be discussed in detail in a later part of the paper. Before presenting them, I want to frame the analysis around issues of collective traumas and memories.

II. Reframing the Boycott in Socio-Psychodynamic Terms

In order to understand the growing support for the idea of the boycott, it is essential to insert the issue into larger social and collective concerns. The twentieth century may turn out to have been one of the ugliest stretches of time in history. Individuals, groups, and nations have been deeply affected and traumatized—cognitively, mentally, and emotionally—by the violence of modern times: two World Wars, genocides (the Shoah, Armenia, North Korea, Bosnia, Darfur), nuclear attacks (Hiroshima and Nagasaki), disintegration of colonial empires, the break-up of the Soviet Union, tribal warfare, global terrorism, etc.

Such violence is internalized across time and space. As Abraham and Torok have so powerfully demonstrated, we are possessed by “phantomatic haunting” (1994, p. 166).

⁴ The arguments made in this paper about ideology and language are based on a study of the left, especially the radical left. However, the same logic would apply to an analysis of extreme right formulations.

They mean by this term that individuals and groups unwittingly inherit the secret psychic substance of their ancestors' lives. In their framework, the phantom represents the interpersonal and transgenerational consequences of silence and secrets, especially around unacknowledged social and/or personal violations. It is when psychic and emotional resilience is so challenged that rhetorical formulations are substituted for the experience of painful emotions. In this context, the boycott provides a container for the expression of haunted memories. This containment is achieved by "de-linking" thoughts from their affective original content and by multiple splitting of the original object (Bion, 1992). The substitution of a rigid ideology for intellectual discussion and the distancing of "action" from emotional meaning are particularly seductive for academics and intellectuals in their somewhat isolated "ivory towers," engaged in the production of knowledge and its paranoid components (Lacan, 1981).

The increasing exposure to physical and symbolic violence experienced directly and indirectly through mass media and the spread of teletechnologies creates the potential for the disintegration of individual and collective psyches as well as for the transgenerational transmission of traumas and the globalization of hatred. The splitting between intellect and emotions can be conceptualized using Bion's (1967) analysis of attacks on linking, in which he discusses how unconscious mental mechanisms dismantle communication by disabling the affective function of recognition and remembering of unwanted feelings and ideas exposing the rigid part of the mental structure. As Bion expressed so clearly: "These attacks on the linking function of emotions lead to an over prominence in the psychotic part of the personality of links which appears to be logical, almost mathematical, but never emotionally reasonable; consequently, the surviving links

are perverse, cruel and sterile” (1967, pp. 93–109). Such attacks on linking by perverse, cruel and sterile thoughts re-enforces negative affects around inflexible and emotionless connections.

Any thoughts will typically be embedded in a wealth of associations that will endow that thought with meanings at once unconscious and idiosyncratic (Chodorow 1999). The power of ideological language comes from access to rigid thinking around decontextualized and empty formulaic frames that attract past traumas energizing repressed affective and bodily memories (Brennan, 2004). Academics and intellectuals who support the boycott play a key role in reframing and redrawing the shifting boundaries of language and emotions toward ideological formulations based on clichéd and disembodied concepts. The idea of the boycott spread widely, disseminated by a free-floating toxic mix of aggression and longing that interacts with traumatic memories of frozen hurt and humiliation both inside and outside of Israel, among Jews and non-Jews alike. The spread of the boycott created a form of contagious connectivity whose effectiveness is based on hollow, clichéd formulations such as “Judeo-nazism,” “racist state,” “imperialism,” “ethnic cleansing,” “apartheid,” etc., which leaves little room for a language of ambivalence, mutual recognition, identification, and empathy.

The problem with applying such terms to describe Israel’s policies is that they do not capture empirical and historical differences but rather assume that these terms have a clearly delineated and universal meaning and thus can be bandied about and spread around with no social or historical filtering. These universalizing formulaic expressions re-enforce multiple splitting between language and meaning, between thoughts and emotions creating what Winnicott identified as “organized chaos” as a form of defense

(1988, 136). The move toward normalizing and universalizing “righteousness” and “morality” points to the use of social defenses to cope with troubling and unintelligible past (Halbwachs, 1992; Alexander et al., 2004). In addition, linguistic slippage and fuzziness are associated with states of confusion and mindlessness (Bollas, 1992, p. 79) that are open to manipulation as when the ego becomes an ideology-fulfilling machine. The speaking subject is seduced by the phantasmatic of floating signs without referent—what Jackie Orr describes as “psychopower,” that is the power of disembodied chains of signifiers in shaping the collective unconscious (2006, p. 15).

Thus radical left-wing intellectuals use political rhetoric as a tool for shaping emotionally charged ideas rather than as a tool of social analysis and shared communication. The support for the boycott and critique of Israel, while having some real substance, loses the legitimacy of its arguments by using undifferentiated and emotionally inflammatory rhetorical devices intended to blur the line between Judaism and Zionism and between Zionism and specific policies of the Israeli State. These fuzzy distinctions have re-enforced a dangerous equation between Zionism and racism, one that has been used for political purposes, such as occurred at the United Nations World Conference Against Racism, in Durban in 2002. The “phantom effect” of transmission that we described earlier is sustained and reproduced when it finds its way into institutional practices. Borrowing Abraham and Torok’s formulation: “Staged words constitute an attempt at exorcism, an attempt, that is, to relieve the unconscious by placing the effects of the phantom in the social realm” (1994, 176). Social institutions contain and shape the social unconscious by giving voice and legitimacy to feelings, sometimes unspeakable ones, as in the case of the equation of Zionism with racism. The

boycott also gives voice and legitimation to that equation by re-framing the discussion around polarities such as “oppressor” and “oppressed” or “victimizer” and “victimized.” As Abraham and Torok suggest, these formulations are forms of exorcism to cope with unacceptable unconscious feelings of despair that need to be contained.

A psychodynamic interpretation of the boycott suggests the presence of a great deal of unresolved narcissistic rage around issues of identification and de-identification with the (m)Other as a way to repair the past. One of our interviewees explained how he felt disappointed and betrayed by the policies of the Israeli State (the mother land), especially since the failure of the Oslo Accords (1993) and the second Lebanese war (2006). The interviewee experienced these events as deep disappointments and betrayals by the State and the army of the original ideals of a full democratic State and the Zionist dream of liberation for the Jewish people from oppression. The interviewee felt that he had been lied to and that his loyalty to Israel was actually a betrayal of Jewish values and of the Zionist dream. To quote an interviewee: “*The second Lebanese war created a lot of anger, guilt, and a feeling of being dispossessed that brought me to question the indoctrination that I had received.*”⁵

The current political situation has touched upon and revived memories of family dislocation, betrayals, and domestic violence. The identification with the other victims, the Palestinians and their suffering, made emotional and political sense in these interviews. The fusion of political disappointment and personal wounds channeled narcissistic rage into an active form of identification with Palestinians—the victimized Others—together with a rejection of the Jewish (parental) State. Such a mutation between

⁵ Only quotation from interviewees were reported in Italics.

the personal and the political is not unlike the case of Carla described by Michael Eigen (2007a, pp. 68–77), who made sense of how the social body had been seduced and raped by State policies by metaphorically equating it to the way her own body had been raped and her mind seduced in childhood. Affective feelings and unconscious thoughts connected both experiences.

The goal of the boycott was not to present a nuanced understanding of the relationship between Israeli and Palestinian people in the current conflict. The generalized political struggle for “Justice” and “Equality” was meant to pull together a disparate group of radical thinkers—left-wing academics across the United Kingdom and Europe, the United States, and the Middle East—creating emotional bonds in the fight against the racist/imperialist Jewish State and, indirectly, Western capitalism (especially U.S. capitalism) and its domination of the world. The sense of belonging to a social movement that cut across national, cultural, and religious differences in the fight for a “morally just” cause provided a powerful magnet for many disenfranchised academics and intellectuals.

One senses a neo-Marxist rhetoric (academics and intellectuals of the world unite!) underpinning a political logic that uses scapegoating as a way to create solidarity in the in-group (Freud, 1930). After the devastation and losses due to colonial wars such as the Algerian War, the Vietnam War, and the collapse of the Soviet Union, etc., the Israeli-Palestinian conflict became in the 1990s an arena for left-wing solidarity, emotional connectedness, and political battles against new forms of Western imperialism. A new global geopolitical landscape of solidarity had emerged, one structured around decentralized grassroots movements and nongovernmental organizations without

traditional hierarchical structures. These new social movements, such as World Social Forums, have re-energized political action away from the rigid structures of family, State, and bureaucratic controls into new forms of solidarity. Ironically, such forms of connectedness, which filled deep psychic needs, were used to promote ideologies that spread latent racism by blaming and demonizing one country, Israel, as the source of all evil.

III. Traumas, Memories, and Ideological Language

The Israeli-Palestinian conflict brings out forgotten and unresolved transgenerational social traumas on both sides of the struggle. As we know from the lives of children of Holocaust survivors, guilt and shame extend across generations, but such feelings are also transmitted across groups and cultures through complex processes of identification and de-identification in which perpetrators, victims, and passive observers become interchangeable within an unconscious dance of repeated intergenerational traumas (Kane, 2005).

Personal traumas shape the life of men and women in a variety of ways, from the formation of early psychic structures to adults' attitudes and emotions. As Lacan (1977) reminds us, the child is always the symptom of the parents; it carries the unconscious desire of the Other. Individuals who have not experienced personal traumas but who belong to a traumatized community or generation have internalized past memories of horror and violence. They are likely to have a diffuse sense of guilt and feel responsible for the passivity, collaboration, and/or betrayal of parents, neighbors, and older generations. They respond by reshaping, projecting, and misremembering the past in

ways that give meaning and make their present lives emotionally bearable. As Salecl, a psychoanalyst, has argued in her study of cultural displacement of memory in Ceausescu's Romania, individuals confronted by a disappointing present become attached to a vision of a rejected authoritarian past they now idealize: "The subject produces this displaced memory in order to avoid the trauma of another memory, so that the coherence of the story the subject tells him or herself is not shattered" (Salecl, 1998, p. 86).

This social regression to an authoritarian idealized past provides emotional security that helps contain despair of an unacceptable present. The search for social legitimacy and emotional security plays a role in shaping an individual's responses to life events in ways that can hide, deny, distort, or redefine anxiety-provoking situations, forcibly converting affects into moral issues and endowing them with feelings of goodness and righteousness (Person, 2006). This dynamic is operating among the supporters of the boycott who are willing to idealize past struggles in order to give meaning to the present conflict. The use of rhetorical arguments energizes individuals, who feel they are undoing and repairing past wrongs (collective and individual), upholding ethical values, and binding together repressed memories that the guilt-laden anxiety has generated. As one interviewee explained: "*It is our duty to undo the mistakes and errors of previous generations.*" Yet despite attempts to undo previous traumas, the dynamic that is generated repeats, in a disguised form, the same cycle of violence in the name of real or imagined new victimizer/victimized pairs.

Support for the boycott mobilizes emotional and libidinal energies through rhetorical formulations that are felt as legitimate, politically correct, and morally sound,

illustrating what Julia Kristeva (1984) has called a form of “political perversion.” In her words: “I identify as political perversion a coherent structure determined by an ideal (this ideal was theoretical for us; perhaps it has been moral for others), which nevertheless uses the abjections of a reality, one that is neglected or even foreclosed, on behalf of libidinal or sublimated gratifications.”

What Kristeva is suggesting is that the endorsement of a coherent and rigid mental structure (ideology) based on either a theoretical or a moral system of ideas is a way to gratify libidinal needs and to cope with the anxiety of unresolved collective memories under the guise of political and/or moral principles. As Freud (1920) stated, acting-out is a substitute for conscious remembering. The organization and support of the boycott could be interpreted as a form of collective “acting-out” of repressed traumatic memories, which become projected onto a new situations under the cover of moral responsibility. Such remembering is part of a projective process, a form of enactment. Using Jonathan Lear’s formulation:

Remembering is an enactment designed to make the present into an artifact of the past, consciousness into an artifact of the unconscious. In its most general sense, the aim of the enactment is to endow the world with comprehensible meaning. As Freud says, transference is a repetition “not only onto the doctor, but onto all other aspects of the current situation.” In the transference, the psyche is engaged in its characteristic activity of trying to create a meaningful world in which to live (Lear, 1998, pp. 65–66).

It is important to make a distinction between “remembering” and “memorialization.” Remembering from a psychoanalytic perspective refers to the ways repressed memories become repeated and sometimes made accessible to consciousness through acting-out, dreams, slips of the tongue, reflexivity, psychoanalysis, etc. As described by Laplanche and Pontalis, memories refer to an embodied unconscious process stemming from memory traces, part of a complicated archive arranged according to the type of association involved: “Their evocation depends on the way in which they are cathected, decathected and counter-cathected” (1973, p. 247).

Remembering creates a collapsed space bypassing the present and allowing the phantasmatic past and delusional future to connect. In such a collapsed space, ideological formulations can flourish because reality has no hold on individual consciousness. To use Masumi’s formulation: “A time slip (*passé-antérieur*) evacuates the suspended present, and with it deliberative reason” (2005, p. 10). The psychotic core keeps memory traces encoded in affective but unprocessed and toxic emotional states. The mind tries to neutralize fears and negative affects, bypassing the more personal and intimate work of grief and mourning by endorsing ideologies that help exonerate, repair, or undo internalized guilt and shame.

Memorialization, in contrast to remembering, refers to the ceremonials and social rituals that objectify traumatic events in the name of collective memory. Memorialization of collective traumas in the form of social rituals is certainly important in acknowledging collective responsibilities, but it should not encapsulate, rigidify, or bypass the more individualized personal feelings of pain and with it a personal mourning process. One interviewee reported his feeling in the following terms: “*True Zionist ideology includes*

the recognition of collective rights, including those of the Palestinian people, but remembering too much is a way of forgetting and a way to avoid personal responsibility.” Memorialization can become a space that dulls or avoids personal feelings. Public/official remembering of past victims of violence and genocide does not necessarily translate into feelings of individual responsibility or empathy, nor does it ensure identification with the victims and their social reality. An ideological discourse of empty/dead language makes it difficult to create a bridge between collective and individual moral responsibilities shaped by shared feelings of guilt and shame.

The radical left, because of its history of involvement in past liberation struggles, is more sensitive to the emotional pressure of remembering but also more likely to act-out repressed feelings of shame and guilt for failing to uphold political ideals or confront authoritarian regimes (Stalinist purges, Stasi repression and murders, etc.). The obsession with the evils of capitalism, the destructive force of Western imperialism, and the demonic nature of the Jewish State reflect a frozen state of mind. To use Doris Lessing’s (1992) words:

The people whose consciousness is being raised may be given information they most desperately lack and need, may be given moral support they need. But the process nearly always means that the pupil gets only the propaganda that the instructor approves of. ‘Raising consciousness’ like ‘political correctness,’ is a continuation of that old bully party line (Questions you should never ask a writer, *New York Times*, June 16 p. A 15).

What Doris Lessing, a Nobel prize winner (2007), is referring to is a double-edged sword stemming from the internalization of ideologies that rigidify thinking and push out unwanted emotions, yet provides knowledge and emotional connectedness.

Academics and intellectuals play a special role as witnesses and bear great responsibility for their ability to frame debates that can either restrain or encourage violence, especially symbolic violence (Chomsky, 1967). What I want to stress is the role of repressed feelings and unacceptable memories that become framed in a language that is both dead (empty) and alive (personal meaning), creating ground for confusion and gratification. Both sides of a conflict organize their political visions around the performativity of words that kills meaning by drowning it in a flood of empty signifiers. The performativity of words should not be underestimated, as Michael Eigen reminds us: “Words kill and make you feel alive, at the same time creating a powerful language vortex” (2007a, p. 36).

The use of the concept of victimhood is an example of the performativity of words that touch upon individual and collective memories. In the Israeli/Palestinian conflict, the victimizers/victimized dynamic constantly reverses itself. The Jews who were the victims of the murderous Nazi machine have become the victimizers in the eyes of those supporting the boycott. They argue that despite the power of the State, Israelis continue to define themselves as the ultimate victim, leading to the use of preemptive military strikes rather than political negotiation or restraint toward the “real victims” (Ginach, 2006). While this argument makes sense in understanding the Israeli psyche, the framing of the boycott debate around “victimhood” creates a competition for the most victimized subjects. This ideological struggle leads to the internalization and projection

of envy and hatred, escalating the mutual displacement of paranoid fears and accusations (Klein, 1957). We are not referring here to the much needed criticism of specific Israeli policies, whether Labor or Likud; rather, we are describing pro-boycott arguments that indirectly question the legitimacy of the Jewish State (Hirsh 2005). Such arguments raise the specter of a renewed anti-Semitism coming surprisingly from educated elites and their discourses (Lappin, 2003; Cowell, 2007) to which we now turn.

IV. Pro-Boycott Styles of Discourse

The ideas presented previously around issues of identification/disidentification, language, memories, and responsibilities are useful in discussing modes of thinking and feeling—paranoid, humanistic, and utopian—of pro-boycott styles of discourse. These three modes of thinking and feeling are not rigidly separated in an individual's mind: they often overlap, although one usually becomes the organizing principle of a discourse. For heuristic purposes and clarity, we will discuss them separately.

Paranoid Thinking

"I see Israel as a colonial and expansionist power. It makes my blood boil."

Defining the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in terms of past colonial struggles, apartheid, racist regimes, and a Judeo-Nazi State creates a "hermeneutics of suspicion," following Paul Ricoeur's (1970) formulation, in which paranoid fears are interpreted by both sides to organize their political visions. Paranoid thinking becomes an imperative framing of an idea within a rigid system of anticipation that suggests the suppression and selective scanning of ideas combined with the repression of aggressive tendencies.

Because of these anticipatory, totalizing, and mimetic tendencies, paranoid thinking becomes a form of privileged knowledge, a medium of cultural and political struggles (Sedgwick, 2003, p. 125). This is also an idea that Freud (1911) had expressed when he compared Schreber's persecutory delusions to his own system of knowledge and that of philosophers in general. A warning for all of us!

Paranoid thinking provides a defensive armor organized around formulaic thoughts and empty pseudo-feelings, a masquerade of sorts that hides deeper, often aggressive emotions. This mode of thinking, based on a theory of circular negative affects, is anchored in fear and suspicion, blocks positive affects from emerging, and engenders a cycle of mistrust and de-linking of thoughts from affects (Tomkins, 1995). Paranoid thinking, as a form of "interpretive autism," describes a process by which factual reality is acknowledged yet its meaning is experienced through an autistic interpretive scheme concerned with hidden motives or underlying purposes (Shapiro, 1965, p. 66). For the boycott's supporters, their attention is directed toward uncovering and denouncing capitalist plots and law violations rather than empathizing with Palestinian people, whose history and life they know little about. To use an interviewee's words: *"It is necessary to use pressure like an electroshock to force the compliance of Israel with international laws. Due to governments' (European and American) weaknesses, it is up to the people to pick up the fight. The boycott is part of it."*

The hermeneutics of suspicion can narrow rather than open up the ability to "unpack the local, contingent relations between any given piece of knowledge and its narrative/epistemological entailments for the seeker, knower, or teller" (Sedgwick, 2003, p. 124). Within a paranoiac logic of suspicion, the performativity of words supports

mechanisms by which language and memory, used to express unacceptable negative thoughts and aggressive feelings, lose their meaning. Casting Israeli academics and intellectuals as aggressors and/or partners to a “Judeo-Nazi racist Jewish State” exemplifies a rhetorical-paranoid device that distorts reality, poisons empathy, and limits compassion. As mentioned before, the uncoupling of symbolic language from affects gives rise to processes of idealization that in turn promote a circuit of depersonalization, creating emotional distance from social reality while encouraging delusional visions and grandiose fantasies for the future (Kristeva, 1993).

Such paranoid thinking allows little room for ambivalence, an emotional state that recognizes opposite and simultaneous feelings of love and hate, idealization and negativity toward a single object or institution, such as the Israeli State. Unlike splitting, which reduces anxiety around a rigid mindset, ambivalence creates anxiety and openness, generating a transitional space that permits room for experimentation and creative thinking (Winnicott, 1965). Rigid thinking, pseudo-feelings, and the avoidance of ambivalence are likely to produce an emotionally seductive discourse embedded within political slogans, as was discussed earlier. This mode of thinking is especially widespread in situations of cultural and religious conflict, as is the case in the Middle East, where past traumas on both sides are unconsciously repeated, relived, re-enforced, and given new meaning within the present context of the struggle.

The focus on victimhood is also grounded in paranoid thinking. Fears of evil capitalistic forces and brutal Nazi-like methods of domination were given by interviewees as grounds for supporting the boycott. Quoting an interviewee: *“I think that the Israeli State has reproduced the mindset and method of Nazi Germany when dealing*

with the Palestinians, who they see as not fully human who can be displaced or disposed of.” Israelis, for historical reasons, experience their victimhood as sacred. Even when behaving as the victimizer, they feel that ultimately they have always been and still are the ultimate victim. In the words of an interviewee: *“Israelis are using real power but they are staying with the mentality of being the victim.”* The supporters of the boycott argue that by thinking that they have no choice but to protect themselves, Israelis end up victimizing the Other and, in so doing, inadvertently participate in their own victimization.

But, when the Israeli State and Israelis are cast as the only victimizers, supporters of the boycott hold Israel to higher ethical standards and moral codes. The existence of asymmetrical power relations and the great suffering of the Palestinian people cannot be denied. However, it is the political manipulation of the debate around victimhood, the demonization of the victimizers (Israelis), and the dehumanization of the victims (Palestinians) that elicits support for the boycott through a language that maintains unconscious associations, which distort the present reality and bring about more polarization (de-linking) between affects and cognition, in what Bollas (1992, pp. 200–207) has called a “Fascistic state of mind.” In this framework, the ideology becomes total, and binds the symbolic order around a sense of narcissistic grandiosity and falsehood.

Nobody, especially radical left-wing academics and intellectuals, wants to be on the side of the victimizers, having to confront unmetabolized feelings and past experiences of their own. This political construction of a struggle between victimizers and victimized, colonizers and colonized was analyzed by Albert Memmi (1965), a

Tunisian Jewish writer and critic of colonialism. What Memmi discovered is that the continued polarization between colonizers and colonized could only lead to a repetition of the same dynamics (trauma) in postcolonial situations. To avoid such repetition of traumatic relations of domination, he suggested the necessity for both groups to engage in a mutual form of recognition and reflexivity. Empathy for the actual suffering endured by the Palestinian people is essential, but when it is coupled with the projection of blame and the displacement of anger onto one group only and the distrust of anyone supporting the Israeli State, the possibility for mutual recognition becomes limited.

Among radical Israelis, the shifting of empathy from the in-group “we-ness schema” to the outer group “underdog schema” is best understood through the lens of paranoid thinking, one in which identification with the victim becomes more meaningful and less emotionally dangerous than an identification with the powerful in-group (Govrin, 2006). It is often easier to empathize with a phantasized Other who is ethnically, religiously, or socially different, as the differences ensure some emotional control and secure boundaries.

The punitive logic of the boycott is based on the power of formulaic words and stereotypical images that touch on emotions with a wide, if not universal, appeal and are based on feelings that bind individuals through a sadomasochistic dance of life and death. In the words of another interviewee: *“If you try to destroy the Other, you are indirectly destroying yourself.”* This logic is encoded in a certain amount of narcissistic enjoyment in making the (m)Other suffer and in creating a never-ending loop of deadly fratricidal competition. This paranoid/punishing mentality, based on abstract, empty, moralistic, tyrannical assertions of moral superiority, separates responsibility from everyday ethics

of caring. The threats that spur paranoid thinking are real; however, the danger comes from the distortion of reality that ultimately dehumanizes, demonizes, and depersonalizes the individuals involved on all sides. Ironically, it is that very dehumanization of the Palestinian people the supporters of the boycott are fighting against that they re-create by using reified words and stereotypical images of Israelis and diffusing them through the mass media, teletechnology, and the Web. This paranoid/punitive logic is corrosive because it blends feelings of goodness, morality, and self-righteousness with aggressive capabilities and murderous wishes. "Short-circuited thinking is already a kind of murder, a murdering of the mind. When words are used to evacuate rather than to build meaning, meaning is murdered." (Eigen, 1996, p. 47). As discussed previously, by tapping into hidden guilt and shame for past traumas, this punishing logic spreads symbolic violence and prompts fears of renewed anti-Semitism by questioning the legitimacy of the Israeli State in a manner going much beyond critiques of specific policies.

Humanistic Thinking

"I want Zionism with a human face."

Interviewees who used humanistic arguments in support of the boycott empathized with the shared humanity and common suffering across groups and cultures. The humanistic logic in support of the boycott gave less weight to purely political arguments of capitalist domination and imperialism. Humanistic thinking was based on the ability to empathize with the Other. Unlike paranoid thinking, the acquisition of a sense of alterity, that is, the acceptance of responsibility and guilt toward an Other as a part of an ethical subjectivity, becomes the focus (Levinas, 1990). Interviewees argued

that identification with the Palestinian people through empathy, even compassion, is based on the recognition of past and present shared suffering. One interviewee suggested including memorial days for both people as a form of sharing a collective past and healing: *“The Israeli State leaves out memorialization of the Naqba, an Arabic word for the forced displacement of Palestinians during the 1947–1949 war, erasing from collective memory part of our shared history. I think that the boycott is an important way to challenge how history is written, especially in universities, and feel connected with the Palestinians.”*

This framework implies that remembering should become a joint process, using biographical memories of trauma to undo past wounds and share responsibilities (Segev, 1986; Kimmerling and Migdal, 2003). The interviewees who expressed such ideas believed that humanistic thinking had the healing power to reconnect human beings across religious, social, and political barriers, as long as the Israelis acknowledge (and repent for) the infliction of past and present suffering on Palestinians. As one interviewee expressed: *“I am ashamed to have caused injustice to a whole group of people. We have made mistakes. We don't want to recognize our mistakes and to compensate for them. Unless we do we cannot expect to find a solution to the conflict.”*

In this humanistic discourse there is an insistence on minimizing the purely ideological aspect of the support of the Palestinian struggle in favor of seeing the Palestinian people as simple human beings. While the analysis of victimhood is still present, reflecting the reality of the power relations between Israelis and Palestinians, it has a different meaning: both groups are equally identified as victims of history and social destructiveness. While oppositional feelings toward the State were still present

among interviewees holding these views, what counted most was the ability to repair the injustices and emotional damages done by Israelis to the Palestinians. According to this position, such reparations can only occur when those in power—the Israeli State and the universities—begin to recognize the Palestinians as partners rather than as enemies. One interviewee, for example, explained: “*By supporting the boycott I wanted to repair the damages done to the Palestinian people rather than criticize either the Israeli governing elites or the Palestinian Authority.*”

This humanistic philosophy was not, however, applied to the in-group and did not lead to empathy with Jewish suffering (except for the victims of terrorist attacks), a suffering that was seen as self-inflicted. This humanistic ethic based around “feeling the pain of the Other” and a desire to repair (*tikkun olam*, in Hebrew) was often divorced from the recognition of geopolitical dangers such as Arab nationalism, religious fanaticism, or global terrorism. Paradoxically, several of the interviewees who defined themselves as “humanist” had little knowledge of Arab culture, ideas, language, or the Muslim religion. With limited knowledge of the history and sociohistorical contexts of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, many interviewees’ ideas were divorced from sociopolitical realities.

It has been suggested that individuals who support the boycott have done so out of self-hate and the rejection of one’s identity (Sibony, 2003; Mamet, 2006). I do not discard offhand this interpretation but would add that the supporters of the boycott experience their actions as both a rejection and an expression of their Jewish identity. However, this emotional move toward empathy can open up a poisonous space for the politization of suffering. The guilt, compassion, and humanity expressed in this discourse

is vitally important and should be acknowledged. Cultural, religious, and ethnic gaps are not so easily bridged, and attempts to universalize suffering and de-emphasize larger political structures limit the effectiveness of this mode of thinking. The supporters of the boycott who stressed this angle saw themselves in grandiose narcissistic terms as “the servants of goodness fighting powerful evil forces” (Govrin, 2006).

By romanticizing the struggle between Israelis (representing the bad) and Palestinians (representing the good), these “compassionate supporters” (Govrin, 2006) or “collusive witnesses” (Bollas, 1992) can mislead and even endanger inexperienced individuals, especially non-Israelis, willing to fight for human-rights issues without understanding the complex geopolitical dynamics of the situation. The sense of rightness that conscience carries may work for good or ill, as mentioned before. Empathy needs to be critically assessed to alert us to its potentially voyeuristic nature and passive gratification. As Susan Sontag has shown in *Regarding the Pain of Others* (2003, p. 202), sympathy can dull our feelings and deny personal responsibility:

So far as we feel sympathy, we feel we are not accomplices to what caused the suffering. Our sympathy proclaims our innocence as well as our impotence. To that extent, it can be (for all good intentions) an impertinent—if not inappropriate—response.

Individuals whose psyches are structured by humanistic thinking are frozen in good feelings and intentions that can cut them off from inner and outer turmoil that ironically limit their personal sense of responsibility.

Utopian/Visionary Thinking

“Israel would not exist today without the dream and vision of Theodore Herzl, which many rejected then as being impossible. The boycott has helped put forward a new vision of a non religious State that I support.”

Another mode of thinking expressed by our interviewees, albeit a minority, was framed around arguments for a new vision of a bi-national State, one in which the present Jewish state would give way to a single, democratic, nonreligious State. As one interviewee put it: *“Jews and Arabs alike would share equally in all its features, including the right of return.”* Such a vision claims to continue an early Zionist tradition of the 1930s and 1940s (Buber/*Brit Shalom*). Interviewees who held this position argued that such a bi-national state would avoid the contradictions between national identity and the values of fairness, equality, and justice so deeply rooted in Jewish teaching. This discourse embraces the views of a tradition—exemplified by the religious scholar Yeshayahu Leibovitz—who states that Jews should not be in the position of being oppressors. In the words of an interviewee: *“Israelis have lost their souls; the occupation has drawn them into nonhuman behavior away from Jewish values. A single nonreligious State is the solution to the conflict.”* Using this vision of a fully democratic, bi-national state, the supporters of the boycott are not only rejecting government policies, whether Labor or Likud, but are also challenging directly the existence of a Zionist state as the only way to maintain a Jewish identity. Rather, they seek to promote a secular, multiethnic, post-Zionist constitution with a guarantee of equal rights for all groups (Nimni, 2003).

Due to demographic trends among Arabs in Israel and the West Bank, a truly democratic State would quickly make Jews in Israel a minority. Given Jewish history and the fate of Jewish minorities in traditionally discriminatory and hostile Arab regimes, such a position is not tenable for most Jews in- and outside of Israel. Paradoxically, their post-Zionist vision of the future, in which once more Jews become a minority, does not have the support of either a majority of Israelis or Palestinians, although some key intellectual thinkers, such as Edward Said (2003) and Tony Judt (2003), have supported the idea. Social science research has shown the near impossibility of having nationalistic groups coexisting in harmony, as in the cases, for example, of Iraq, Lebanon, and the former Yugoslavia. The fate of other minority groups (for example, Christians) in the occupied territories is another case in point. Despite such failures, the ideals—some would say delusional ideals—of a universalizing unity in a bi-national State is emotionally enticing and politically useful in promoting solidarity among Arabs at the expense of the present Jewish State.

Located within a postmodern intellectual tradition, utopian/visionary thinking is defined by a strong rejection of Western—especially American—capitalist values and a reactionary modernism, now called neoliberalism, which supports concepts such as national identity, democratic rights, and national boundaries (Rose, 2005). In this new framework, Israel becomes an “anachronism” by defending and insisting on maintaining separate territorial integrity and ethnic solidarity. Because it touches so deeply on issues of Jewish identity and territoriality, this position has brought about the strongest reactions among supporters of Israel and critics of the boycott, who brand this vision as latent anti-Semitism. In my view, it would be wrong to call these supporters of the boycott anti-

Semitic. Several interviewees reported feeling anger at being labeled anti-Semitic because of their opposition to a religious Zionist Jewish state. In the word of one interviewee: *“I am angry at being branded disloyal, self-hating, and even anti-Semitic because I am opposed to a Zionist Jewish State. What brings about anti-Semitism is the idea that because Israel and the Jews have a history of suffering and persecution, they cannot do anything wrong. Israeli leaders think that they are above International Law.”*

This utopian vision of the future with its sense of historical drama appeals to the visionary hopes of Jewish and Arab radical academics and intellectuals, providing them with a shared psychological terrain of grandiose mutual recognition and support across ethnic and religious lines. Such revolutionary vision exists away from the controls and limitations of traditional national states, party systems, and state-controlled institutions. However, this utopian mentality is guided by a universalizing ideology and a phantasy of oneness that leaves little room for particularistic group needs. Going back to the issue of memory and collective responsibility, this utopian/visionary thinking is not attached to either the recent past or the present. It is positioned in a mythical past/future spurred by a feeling of delusional phantasies of destructive union.

V. Conclusion

In order to understand the emotional roots of academics and intellectuals who support the ideas of the boycott, it is important to distinguish between the organizers and the rank and file. Many of the Europeans and Americans followers who support the boycott are convinced that they are doing “good”; they believe they are actively engaged in changing a situation that is unjust and morally wrong. For them the means (attack on

academic freedom) justify the end (ending the occupation). Their position of support provides narcissistic gratification as active agents of “revolutionary” social change. By taking a proactive position on issues identifiable with past liberation struggles, some academics have been seduced by a political agenda through which they could re-direct unacknowledged feelings of shame and guilt for past actions inactions, and/or indifference to the suffering of others, trying to cope with their own pain and powerlessness in search of some emotional closure.

However, there is a darker side to this story. The impact of the ideas behind the boycott are directly and indirectly a challenge to the existence of a Jewish state.⁶ In a globalized world linked by mass communication networks and teletechnology, their anti-Israel message spreads easily. There is more at stake in the boycott than criticizing Israeli policies. Its message—heard by groups and countries engaged in their own ethnic/religious struggles—encourages a clash between Western and Islamic visions and damages potential collaboration between Israelis and Palestinians. Equally important, the arguments made in support of the boycott strangles the hope for a fair two-state solution by delegitimizing the Israeli State as a Jewish State.

Support for the proposed boycott could be seen as an incidental episode within the larger picture of the conflict between the Israeli State and the Palestinian people. Yet the waves of emotionally loaded, clichéd arguments in support of the boycott are not benign, since they operate unconsciously to affect traumatized individuals and social psyches into patterns of repetition and reversal of ideological mystification on both sides (Žižek,

⁶ As formulated by promoters such as the British Association of University Teachers (AUT) and the Palestinian Campaign for the Academic and Cultural Boycott of Israel (PACBI). For a discussion of the arguments for the boycott, see *Engage Forum*, 10/1/2006.

2002). Historical situations are full of ambiguities, suffering, and reversals. Any ideological language that dehumanizes suffering makes it difficult to break away from the oppressor/oppressed formulation. Reflexive thinking and ambivalent feelings embrace more complicated realities—ones in which suffering does not necessarily bring about empathy and where ideological language hides an emotional vortex of pain and aggression. Academics and intellectuals need to remember that both racism and anti-Semitism are forms of delusion about oneself that include absurd and unjust aggressions toward the (m)Other.

A consequence of the proposed boycott has been to make it more difficult to support joint programs between Jewish-Israeli and Arab-Israeli academics and intellectuals,⁷ and it has weakened the already fragile links between Israelis and Palestinian universities. Paradoxically, the boycott has affected programs of cooperation among Israeli Jews, Israeli Arabs, and Palestinians. In the name of an ideological struggle for “social justice” and “political revolutionary transformation,” it has increased hopelessness especially among the Israel left. Polarization and antagonism (struggle/revolution) are more politically effective and emotionally rewarding than the dilution of the workings of power relations through discussion, mutual compromise, and cooperation. In this framework, Jewish history, with its tales of persecution, pogroms, and genocide, comes to be used by boycott supporters as ammunition against the very people, the Jews and the State of Israel, whose ideas they have borrowed but whose

⁷ Among them are some nonprofit volunteer organizations: *B'Tzelem* is a nongovernmental organization that monitors human-rights violations in Israel, the West Bank, and Gaza. It is staffed by Jewish Israelis and Arab Israelis. *Ta'ayoush* is composed of young Jewish and Arab students who organize humanitarian activities for needy Palestinians and organize political protests. Others include: Rabbis for Human Rights (<http://www.rhr.org.il>); *Machsom* Watch (www.Machsomwatch.org.il); and *Yesh Gvul*, Israeli reservists and pilots who have refused to serve in the first Lebanese war and in the West Bank. For a fuller description, see Warschawski and Sibony (2002).

history and suffering they cannot empathize with. The irony and sadness of this situation is that the suffering and domination of Palestinian people become more hidden, forgotten, or unacknowledged.

The great majority of academics, among Jews and non Jews alike, see the proposed boycotts as an attack against Jewish identity, survival, and the right to a homeland, as well as a strike against the mission of universities to promote open intellectual exchanges. As academics and intellectuals, we feel it is important to challenge the ideas behind the boycott while being careful not to get caught ourselves in a circle of mutual attacks. As the Palestinian writer Elias Khoury pointed out in his book *Gate of the Sun*, Palestinian privation and Israeli cruelty should not be used in rounds of mutual despair and accusation. We need to use a language of nourishment that can bridge the gap between cognition and feelings in ways that make connectedness and empathy possible, while recognizing the socio-historical limits in being able to do so.

The documentary film *Born in Jerusalem* (2007) follows a mother who has lost her eighteen-year-old daughter in a suicide bombing as she meets the parents of the suicide bomber, a woman of the same age, via satellite connection. The documentary shows the difficulty of sharing human suffering. The pain of these two mothers is contained in a political discourse that traps emotions into frozen states of feeling as protection against acknowledging personal traumas and a sense of social vulnerability as they become representatives of group norms and ideologies. This was especially striking in the case of the Palestinian mother.⁸

⁸ The movie was directed and produced by Hilla Medalia and was first shown at the Jerusalem Film Festival in 2007. It shows how the death of two daughters (the dead Israeli woman and the dead Palestinian suicide bomber, a woman of the same age) is experienced by the two mothers when they are able to

The clinical setting is one of the few places where we can question ourselves and challenge the “normative unconscious” that defines cultural expectations (Layton, 2004). In that space, the reciprocal links between emotion and cognition, the self and the social, individual and collective unconscious can be explored and revived. Listening to past traumas with the “Third Ear” (Reik, 1948), working through feelings of guilt and shame and sharing in a mourning process for known and unknown losses on all sides, may demystify ideologies and their dead language. We need to constantly listen to the voices of past generations through the unconscious of an Other. Psychoanalysts are reluctant to explore in sessions social and political questions, in the name of science, objectivity, and/or detachment. Making links between the personal and the social should not be defined as “resistance” rather it should be viewed as the ability to dream the personal through the social and vice a versa.

As a group, psychoanalysts have a special responsibility to be alert to all forms of violence which stays hidden in the collective unconscious and can become exploited politically. Ideologies, whether of the right or the left, should all be critically exposed for “de-linking” thoughts from affects in an attempt to seduce the self and dominate and the Other.⁹ Neutrality under the guise of universalism is a myth. Psychoanalysis is a powerful tool, part of a tradition of critical thinking that exposes the manipulations of emotions and desires in the name of goodness and morality (Eigen, 2007b).

Psychoanalysts need to question their own universalizing tendencies and paranoid knowledge in their writing and practice. Writing this paper made me more attuned to the

communicate their emotional pain and loss after several years. The movie was reviewed in the *New York Times* on October 24, 2007.

⁹ The use of the term “Islamofacist” to describe Arab culture is equally to be deplored.

complexities behind the support for the boycott and the need to keep the dialogue open, giving voices to a wider and more humane discourse of doubt on all sides.

Language is structured around both symbolic (verbal) and semiotic (preverbal) communications. In clinical settings these forms of language can be channeled and give form to feelings of empathy, fear, shame, guilt, etc., struggling to avoid becoming frozen states of mind for analyst and analysand alike. Psychoanalysis has a small but important contribution to make in supporting the flow of feelings and ideas that create bridges between the individual and collective unconscious as well as in sensitizing analyst and analysand to the dangers of not seeing the stranger in ourselves. However, this opening and oscillation process of a self/other dialectic has to be supported by socio-legal frameworks for greater equality and fairness. The power of language that shapes the process of linking emotions and cognition could operate as social defenses against the repetition of past traumas, filtering their undigested or indigestible feelings; but as we know language can also be used to deny emotions and erase a sense of social reality. Engaging in a dialogue with the Other cannot easily happen in socio-political situations that favor paranoid thinking or support systems of social and legal controls that limit freedoms, academic freedom among them.

Writing, especially creative writing, is another expression of this complex interaction of language with desire and its power to shape the unconscious as Jacques Lacan so powerfully demonstrated. The question remains: how to go from using a dead language of clichéd formulations to a human, breathing language of connectedness and responsibility? The talk given by David Grossman (2007) marking the anniversary of Yitzhak Rabin's assassination is a deep and touching example of how language can heal

the divide between personal loss and collective responsibility and help recover a sense of self.¹⁰

I write . . . I do my best not to shield myself from the just claims and suffering of my enemy. Nor from the tragedy and entanglement of his own life. Nor from his errors or crimes. Nor from the knowledge of what I myself am doing to him. Nor finally, from the surprising similarities I find between him and me . . .

I write, and I feel how the correct and precise use of words is sometimes like a remedy to an illness. Liken a contraption for purifying the air, I breathe in and exhale the murkiness and manipulations of linguistic scoundrels and language rapists of all shades and colors. I write and I feel how the tenderness and intimacy I maintain with language, with its different layers, its eroticism and humor and soul, give me back the person I used to be, me, before my self became nationalized, and confiscated by the conflict, by government and armies, by despair and tragedy.

As this article was being prepared for publication, the boycott campaign against Israeli academics and researchers ended, five years after it started. The British University and College Unions were informed by their lawyers that their actions of excluding academics and researchers who are Israelis from taking part in the academic community and to exclude nobody else would be in violation of equal opportunity legislation in Britain and a form of racism punishable by British law. The organizers of the boycott had

¹⁰ David Grossman's son was killed in the second Lebanese war (2007).

broken antidiscrimination laws and could be held individually and collectively responsible. At that point the boycott came to an end, but the use of ideologies to shape the minds and feelings of individuals is still at work and needs constant critical scrutiny.

What the story of the boycott and its defeat suggests is that the unconscious knows no right or wrong but can be manipulated through the use of language especially ideological language. The end of the boycott points to the importance of social institutions and legal frameworks in protecting all freedoms, including academic freedom. While reaffirming the dangers of paranoid thinking in academia and the political arena, this research has given me hope that concerns for morality and responsibility are still a major force in shaping left-wing politics today, yet I also experienced renewed fears regarding the power of ideologies to provide a poisonous substitute for the emotional nourishment needed to fill in empty psychic spaces in an expanding world of violence.

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