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Exit, voice, loyalty: The case of the BDS

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Abstract

The essay proposes an unexpected alliance between two of the figures assembled in the impressive intellectual constellation Benhabib presents in her new book: Albert O. Hirschman and Judith Butler. Hirschman's model of 'exit, voice, loyalty' is used to interpret and justify the Palestinian call for Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions against Israel.

Keywords

BDS, Israel/Palestine, stakeholders, statelessness, the Jewish condition

In her new book, Seyla Benhabib assembles an unusual group of thinkers, all of Jewish origin, and constructs a collage of loosely linked theoretical questions and positions, most of which vibrate through the towering figure and work of Hannah Arendt. In her concluding remarks, Benhabib presents the themes that run throughout this collage: 'Jewish identity and otherness; exile, voice, and loyalty; legality and legitimacy in liberal democracies, and pluralism and the problem of judgement' (185). Each set of the themes is inflected by Benhabib's effort to think statelessness and migration. Invoking moments of migration and statelessness in the lives of her thinkers, Benhabib observes how these reflect or illuminate aspects of the general 'Jewish condition' of their time. Explicitly and implicitly, those aspects are masterfully linked with or juxtaposed to Arendt's experience as a persecuted Jew, a stateless émigré and a critical, then disillusioned Zionist, and to the conceptual analytics that guided her reflections on these matters.

Although it never existed as such, the intellectual constellation that emerges from this assemblage makes perfect theoretical sense, offering unexpected juxtapositions, conceptual oppositions and political alliances. The constellation appears like an intricate puzzle to play and think with, and further elaborate. I am proposing here one such move

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made possible by this constellation to demonstrate its fertility while using it as a critique of a point which is relatively marginal in the book, but, I believe, central for understanding the present Jewish condition. It concerns a quite surprising convergence between two of the thinkers Benhabib engages, Albert O. Hirschman and Judith Butler. Hirschman's model of 'exit, voice, loyalty' (EVL),[1] which Benhabib presents as an example for Hirschman's 'penchant for self-subversion' of his own thinking (157), provides a fresh perspective on the Palestinian call for Boycott of, Divestment from and Sanction on Israeli public institutions (BDS). Butler's support of the call is criticized by many, including Benhabib, in a rare, short and fierce polemic moment in the book (96–97). This polemic reproduces not only the debate on the BDS but its status as a symptom to the 'Israelization' of contemporary Jewish life and the deep rift it has produced. One's response to the Palestinian call is a litmus test for one's basic understanding of and response to the Jewish condition at the present historical moment.

Hirschman's EVL is a well-known theory in the social sciences that correlates (usually private) exit and (usually public) protest as two modes of response to and factors in the change of a deleterious or deteriorating organization. In political contexts, when states are the relevant organizations, exit means migration and potential statelessness and voice means political action, from petitions to rebellions. Benhabib rightly notes that this is a clear, even if implicit point of contact between Hirschman and Arendt. Statelessness, after all, is a case of more or less forced exit from the state to which one belonged, when alternative states are unavailable, and exit means exile. Benhabib makes the shift explicit when she calls her first set of themes 'exile, voice, and loyalty', coalescing Arendt's writings on refugees and statelessness and one of Hirschman's main contributions to the social sciences.

Replacing exit with exile, Benhabib turns the active response of individuals reacting to a failing organization into an involuntary predicament of 'failing' individuals or groups who are persecuted for not fitting the image of the nation imposed by the political authorities (of the empire, the state or another relevant organization). In fact, exile means a radical denial of voice to people who are considered the least loyal. Butler's support of the BDS movement can be read in terms of empathy for Palestinians forced into exile and of political activism exercised in the form of a particular form of exit – the boycott.

We cannot understand the stakes of the BDS call without delving into the arguments for and against it. But instead of speaking for Butler, reiterating her arguments (which she presented expansively),[2] I would like to let Hirschman's – 'a Jew by decree' who 'never belonged to a Jewish community' and 'never carried his displacement as a badge, a familiar default for exiles'[3] – do the work. His EVL model can help us explicate the Palestinian call as a form of political action, invites us to reflect on the condition in which it is taken, and the distinct way in which the call challenges its Jewish addressees, forcing them to come to terms with the state of Israel as the most decisive factor of Jewish history in our times.

Social scientists, including Hirschman himself, have continued revising and experimenting with the EVL model ever since its publication, using it to describe, explain, sometimes measure and predict a wide range of economic, social and political phenomena.[4] Most researchers have studied exit and voice as two distinct but interdependent responses to problems in an organization to which one belongs or in which one is

invested in one way or another, while the level of loyalty to the organization has been mostly conceived as what motivates the choice between the two.[5] The interrelation between the three, and the changing conditions that determine the preference of one over the others, under which conditions exit and voice compete, hinder or increase each other's chances, how to assess the relative ease and cost of exit and voice, the impact of the existence and availability of alternatives, the association of exit with a private decision and voice with public action, under which conditions *public exit* and *private voice* could be exercised – these have been some of the questions studied and debated.

The model has been studied in firms, corporations, families, sport clubs and community centres, congregations and parties, democratic states and dictatorships, and the actors have been identified as consumers, investors, citizens, voters, party members and so on. Hirschman himself applied the model to politics and considered the state as an organization that could incentivize those governed by it to exit, use their voice to bring change or express their loyalty despite difficulties and tempting alternatives. From Rousseau, Hirschman extracted 'a theory of a small, stateless ["savage"] society in which the availability of exit has the dual function of defusing conflict and of assuring a continuous process of fission – and thereby the continuation of the condition of statelessness'.[6] In the same paper, he identified secession and capital flight as two forms of exit from the modern, Western state, which followed each other historically. In the early 90s, in the wake of the disintegration of the Soviet Block, he dedicated a brilliant essay to the waves of exit and protest that brought the German Democratic Republic (East Germany) to its demise.[7] Against a backdrop of a long history of formalist, even quantitative applications of the EVL model, Hirschman used his own model to describe and interpret a distinct, non-generalizable historical phenomenon. The essay exemplifies an imaginative use of the model's categories – exit, voice and loyalty – to capture a chain of unprecedented events that led to the non-violent disintegration of the East German state. Relying on this creative use of the model, we should also remember its original economic context and language,[8] the opening it creates for politicizing economic relations and the ease with which economic metaphors can be transplanted into a political context, problematizing assumptions about participation, membership and responsibility.

An organized boycott campaign against a deleterious organization does just that: challenging patterns of membership and affiliation, challenging loyalties, offering shareholders and stakeholders alike (see below) a political mode of participation, of claiming and sharing responsibility and forcing the organization's governing body to reconsider the scope of its accountability. All this is achieved due to the special combination of voice and exit which a boycott campaign generates. Those who take part in it are not addressing the organization's governing body but its customers or investors, its shareholders as well as its stakeholders. The campaign seeks to render voice into massive exit. Activists who use boycott seek 'to voice this exit' back, so as to break the glass walls of the CEO's halls; but they also hope that the threat of such an exit or its actual performance would change the environment – including supply and demands, prestige, rebranding, legislation, regulation and so on – in which the organization does business, forcing it to transform or else to disintegrate.[9] To be effective, a boycott campaign should target loyal clients and customers' entrenched patterns of behaviour, hence the

complaint driving the campaign usually takes place when the organization ignores more moderate or less costly forms of pressure.

The Palestinians who have issued the BDS call are in precisely this situation. All their previous attempts to use voice – with or without recourse to violence – to address the organization that rules them and change the way they are governed have failed. Their plight as forced 'clients' of the Israeli state has increased significantly since a political dialogue between their representatives and the Israeli government began 30 years ago. Whether they are second-class citizens, rightless non-citizens in the Occupied Territories or decedents of refugees living outside Palestine – the state responsible for their dispossession, daily humiliation and political oppression ignores their grievances. Their violent resistance was crushed, and each and every form of their non-violent resistance, including unionization, street demonstrations, the flying of balloons and kites, has been delegitimized and suppressed. The BDS movement is not an exception.

When voice is not available, or not effective or even counter effective and dangerous, exit should have become an alternative route. Unlike other draconian regimes, Israel does not block the Palestinians' way out. On the contrary, it forced them to leave en masse in 1948–1949 and has continued to encourage exit in less violent ways since then to secure a Jewish majority in Palestine. A *voluntary* Palestinian exit is welcome by most Israeli Jews; a *forced* Palestinian exit is, for many Jews, a legitimate strategic goal awaiting its proper opportunity. Before freedom, political rights and equality, the Palestinian struggle against the Zionist movement and the State of Israel has been a struggle over their right to stay in Palestine and, for those expelled, to right to return to it. The trauma of the Naqba is a trauma of a forced exit or of a voluntary, temporary exit which has become indefinite. Exit today means the continuation of the Naqba by other means, replacing the subordination to a triumphant enemy with voluntarily bringing an end to the existence of Palestinians as the people of Palestine. Within the framework of a national struggle, exit, for Palestinians, cannot be a form of *public* action.

The Palestinians' call for BDS should be read as a response to a situation in which the stake of the complaints are very high, and yet both voice and exit are conceived as impossible. Short of actions that endanger the very existence of Palestinians in Palestine both modes of action are effectively unavailable. The BDS movement, which was formally founded in July 2005, gained its momentum and became the main platform of the Palestinian non-violent struggle in response to the catastrophic repression of the Second Intifada and the collapse of the Oslo negotiations. As is often the case in boycott campaigns, the immediate addressee of the call has not been the repressive government but a public of Israel's stakeholders across the globe. States have stakeholders of many kinds, and the state of Israel is an especially good example of this phenomenon.[10] Israel's stakeholders include not only non-citizens who do business with or in Israel, those who have relatives there or addicted tourists. By defining itself as a Jewish State and claiming to have a stake in Jewish affairs and interests wherever Jews live, Israel, like the Zionist movement from which I sprang, claims to consider all Jews as its potential or actual stakeholders, if not shareholders. According to Israeli law and its long-standing policies, every Jew in the world is entitled to become a citizen upon arrival and is encouraged to see Israel as a safe haven in times of trouble. Every taxpaying American citizen can also see herself as a shareholder, for it is out of her pocket that the United States has invested

many billions in Israel's military, economy and scientific research. Other stakeholders include an unusually large number of sympathizers and supporters – Christian evangelists, conservative republicans, White supremacists, neo-nationalists and some old socialists too – mostly, but not only in the United States and Europe. Usually ignorant about, or indifferent to Palestinian life under Israeli rule, these stakeholders are attached to some phantasmatic image of Israel and its land, its Biblical history and myths, the blooming of its deserts, its allegedly democratic institutions at the heart of the Middle East or its undefeatable war machine.

The Palestinians' BDS appeal is a call for all Israel's stakeholders to exercise their right to exit, to withdraw any affiliation with the deleterious organization and all the institutions it sustains. The call is issued by a large group of subjects who are governed by the state but cannot become its shareholders and whose voice has failed to address and affect the actual and effective shareholders, Israel's Jewish citizens. These activists turn to international stakeholders instead. They call upon individuals whom Israel has already deeply disappointed or enraged to turn public the exit they have already exercised or contemplated exercising privately. Corporations, firms, sport clubs, artists, scientists and academics are called to disengage with a state that for too long has failed to deliver some of the goods with which it is associated – democracy, human dignity, Jewish renaissance – or delivers them in a way that undermines it's *raison d'être*. It is also an appeal to governments to encourage and even impose exit on the institutions and economic firms they support or regulate.[11] One of the striking features of the BDS call is that it challenges deeply entrenched sense and patterns of loyalty to Israel among Jews worldwide.

The call is issued by, and in the name of three groups of Palestinians: the second-class citizens of Israel, the non-citizens living under Israeli occupation and the descendants of refugees who were uprooted and expelled from territories under Israel's control in 1948 or 1967. The call includes the basic claim of each of the three Palestinian groups: the right of return of the refugees' descendants, liberation to the Palestinians under occupation and equality to the Palestinian citizens of Israel. Over and above these three demands, the Palestinians insist on putting an end to Jewish privileges and dismantling the system of differential rule in Palestine. Whereas the Palestinians' own exit would mean their utter defeat, the exit of the stakeholders, of those who are not attached to the land but to an image of the State that rules it, is conceived as the Palestinians' only hope today to achieve freedom and justice. Stakeholders' exit would supplement the missing, silenced or ignored voice of those who cannot become shareholders, who are doomed to statelessness in their own land and who are forced to stay without rights or leave without ever being able to return. If loyalty is said to 'increases an actor's propensity to choose voice over exit',[12] the BDS is a call for disloyalty. Its reverberations throughout the Jewish world split the voice of non-Israeli Jews, offer exit itself as a voice for those who accept it, and encourage private, silent exit for those who are reluctant to display the end of their relation with Israel in public. At the same time, it incites passionate expressions of loyalty from the opposite side, mobilizing many Jews and Israel lovers to protect Israel from its critics.

The BDS movement understands Zionism and Israel as formations of a settler colonial movement and their own campaign as a struggle for decolonization. So does Butler, together with many other students of the history of Israel/Palestine and of settler

colonialism. Benhabib, on the other hand, refuses, without argument, 'the formula that Zionism is a form of settler colonialism' (82). The BDS movement and many of its supporters call Israel an apartheid state and see the whole network of legal spatial, and administrative separations spread out throughout Israel/Palestine as the current phase of the settler colonial project. Benhabib says, again, without argumentation, that the analogy between the BDS movement and 'the South African anti-apartheid struggle' is false (98), passing in silence the more important analogy between the two regimes of separations. By avoiding argumentation on these two basic claims of the BDS movement, Benhabib joins many, on both sides of the debate, for whom the answer to the questions of settler colonialism and apartheid in the Israeli case is a matter of deep conviction, a principle of faith that precedes argumentation and takes its place. Although I think that the comparative analysis is important, the argument proposed here bypasses it. The rationale of the BDS movement is not derived from branding Zionism settler colonialism and the Israeli regime as apartheid but from the simple fact that neither exit nor voice is available while systematic injustice, oppression, humiliation and dispossession prevail. The differential system of ruling that lies at the core of the Israeli regime and generates the Palestinian condition may be called by many names and have alternative histories that explain its lasting endurance and encompassing power, but none of these can justify its preservation. In the same vein, the fact that Palestinians have tried to resist their oppression and dispossession with violent, immoral and often utterly despicable means and that not all which went wrong in Israel/Palestine can be blamed on the Jewish side (as Benhabib notes) cannot serve to justify the injustice ingrained in and cultivated by the current Israeli regime or delegitimize the BDS movement and reject its call for non-violent, civic actions in search of a political solution. Oppressors cannot hide behind the counter-violence their oppression breeds.

And yet this call for exit, Benhabib says, is not simply a call to reform a deleterious organization, the Israeli State; it is rather an act that endangers that state's very existence. When joining the Palestinians' insistence on 'the rights of Palestinians dispossessed in 1948', and calling with them to take aim at 'undoing Israeli colonial power and military force', Butler sounds as calling 'for the dismantling of Israel as a state and of its military'.[13] Benhabib echoes a familiar rejection and critique of the BDS call, which is especially sensitive to the fact that Palestinians go beyond the demand to end 'the occupation' (of lands conquered in 1967) and to grant equal rights to all Palestinians living in historical Palestine and insist on including the right of return of the refugees' descendants.

But how could a call 'to undo Israeli colonial power and military force' (Butler) or even a call to dismantle Israel together with its military (Benhabib's reading of Butler) endanger the state of Israel? Let us assume that this call is backed by successful boycotts, divestments and sanctions and a massive exit of stakeholders take place. Such an exit may bring a significant exit of Jewish shareholders, that is, Israeli citizens, those who already feel discontent with their government and others who may react to possible decline in their living standards brought about by a successful BDS campaign. Thus, the exit 'from the outside' may cause an exit from the inside (mirroring Israel's policies that encourage Palestinians' exit). But a Jewish exit may also make Israeli Jews more willing to listen to voices calling for a radical reform of their political system. Jewish

citizens who would choose to stay – either because they are loyal or because migration is too taxing – may react to either exit or to both by raising their own voice against the current interpretation of Zionism by the Jewish majority in Israel and struggle for Palestinian equality and human rights. They may find new motivation and resources to renew their loyalty to democracy or even to a non-nationalist form of Zionism. The government will have to listen to them. At some point, the government may even be willing to listen to Palestinians who envision their coexistence with Jews in historic Palestine,[14] and to others, Jews and Palestinians working together on planning peaceful ways to implement the right of return.

Where is the existential threat? The BDS movement is a civic movement that explicitly and repeatedly insist on a non-violent struggle. If successful it could become an existential threat only as long as the organization it seeks to transform would insist on remaining what it is – a state that keeps stealing Palestinian lands and ignores its responsibility for the Palestinian Naqba, where only Jews are true shareholders, while Palestinians – between a fifth and a quarter of all citizens – are second class citizens,[15] about three million Palestinians in the West Bank and East Jerusalem are governed as non-citizen subjects and almost two million are suffocating and getting mad in the open prison of the Gaza Strip. In the territories under Israel's direct and indirect control, there live today about 6.9 million Jews and 6.7 million Palestinians. The vast majority of the former accept as inevitable the staggering inequality between the two populations and the entire repressive State apparatuses that maintain, reproduce and extend it. The BDS campaign threatens this ideological consensus and these state apparatuses.

This state formation can be neither understood nor excused as an effect of a tragic war between two stateless peoples; the struggle for dismantling it is not only legitimate, it is a moral duty. Furthermore, as far as Jews are concerned, at stake in this struggle is not only normative action but loyalty to the Jewish people, and to a vision of a state that does not replicate the forces that made the Jew the ultimate figure of statelessness, and eventually the ultimate figure of the victim of the 20th century. At stake is the very possibility of belonging to the Jewish people while accepting – or refusing to accept – the current Zionist interpretation of Jewish nationalism, which makes the eternal reproduction of the statelessness of others a precondition for ending Jewish statelessness.

In its broad outline, both Butler and Benhabib share this vision (4–5). Butler's *Parting Ways* is a contribution to a reformulation of this vision, which includes an explicit attempt to reconstruct – in fact to invent – a Jewish tradition within which this vision can thrive. Where Butler fabricates a tradition, Benhabib's new book constructs, with a similar goal in mind, a constellation of intellectual voices that invigorate non-nationalist, non-fundamentalist forms of Jewish life and would not exclude Israel from its progressive agenda. The crucial difference revealed by their opposite response to the BDS call lie neither in their visions nor in their understanding of normative action, subjectivity or the nature of the political, not even in their interpretations of the history of Zionism, and it cannot be reduced to a difference of affection – the anxiety that animates Benhabib's rejection of the BDS call versus the passionate solidarity with the Palestinians that drives Butler. These are important differences, but the BDS call galvanizes and structures them in a binary opposition that centres on the assessment of the deleterious organization targeted by the BDS campaign. For Jews who were not born anti-Zionists and who, like

Arendt, accept the importance of a Jewish homeland and of Jewish access to military power, and who, like Arendt, have critiqued Israel out of care and solidarity, not hatred, the BDS call creates an exigency – to learn, to know and to acknowledge the kind of state Israel has become. They have to decide: can they still be associated with *this* kind of state.

What kind of state, then? Butler and Benhabib have two very different portraits of Israel in mind, and both write as if, for them, the question is settled.[16] But is it, really? One of the contributions of the BDS call is to invite its addressees to reconsider the question. In the two corpora Butler and Benhabib have assembled, the only thinker who can help one understand what Israel has been and what it has become is Arendt. Yet when invited to the intellectual banquet, she has never been asked where she would place Israel in the small repertoire of European regimes, to which she added totalitarianism, and how to assess its impact on the Jewish condition today. Asking these questions, one should go beyond her decades old critique of Zionism, borrow some of the categories and conceptual constellations unfolded in the *Origin of Totalitarianism* and *Eichmann in Jerusalem* and draw on some of the analytic tools used there to X-ray political regimes, dissect their modi operandi and reconstruct their genealogy.[17] But this is a topic for another essay, perhaps another book.

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Notes

1. See Hirschman (1970).
2. For example, see "Statement of Support for an MLA Academic Boycott Resolution." Accessed January 3, 2017. https://mlaboycott.wordpress.com/2017/01/03/judith-butlers-statement-of-support-for-an-mla-academic-boycott-resolution/; "Judith Butler on BDS and Anti-semitism," a videotaped address, Verso. Accessed October 10, 2017. https://www.verso-books.com/blogs/3435-video-judith-butler-on-bds-and-antisemitism.
3. Adelman (2013, 98, 571, 2. and cf. ibid 25).
4. For example, see Dowding (2015); Clark, Golder, and Golder (2017).
5. Clark, Golder, and Golder argue that it should be considered as 'behavioral response in its own right, on a par with exit and voice' (2017, 720).
6. See Hirschman (1978, 91).
7. See Hirschman (1993).
8. See Hirschman (1970, 45); Benhabib, 157.
9. On Boycott of corporations as a "stakeholder activism," see Feher (2015, 74, 114).
10. States have shareholders too: their citizens. Ever since states stopped being considered as extensions of their princes, they have been acknowledged as intermediate space, placed between the people (citizens and other governed subjects) and their rulers, and shared by all citizens. Cf. Skinner (1997).
11. See https://bdsmovement.net/what-is-bds.
12. See p. 2 and note 5 above.
13. Benhabib, ***Exile***, 97. Butler, **Parting Ways**, 217.

14. See, e.g. the "vision documents" written and published by groups of Palestinian citizens of Israel: http://mada-research.org/wp-content/uploads/2007/09/watheeqat-haifa-english.pdf; https://www.adalah.org/uploads/oldfiles/newsletter/eng/dec06/tasawor-mostaqbali.pdf), and https://www.adalah.org/uploads/oldfiles/Public/files/democratic_constitution-english.pdf).
15. See "Basic Law: Israel – The Nation State of the Jewish People." Accessed July 18, 2018. https://web.archive.org/web/20180719173434/https://knesset.gov.il/spokesman/eng/PR_eng.asp?PRID=13978.
16. The portrait drawn by Butler is much closer to the Israel I know, have experienced, and studied.
17. Here are some abbreviated examples: the right to have rights; the 'rights of Englishmen' versus the Rights of Men; continental imperialism; the rule of law versus rule by decrees; alliance between the mob and the elite; propaganda and organization; total domination; suspects versus objective enemies; superfluity; thoughtlessness and collaboration.

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