

Clear, Simple and Wrong

By Peter Haas

The famous American cultural critic, H.L. Mencken, once said that, “For every complex problem there is an answer that is clear, simple, and wrong.” I am reminded of this *bon mot* every time I hear of a BDS campaign that claims to be putting forward a simple answer to the Israel-Palestine problem by proposing a boycott of Israeli goods, divesting in some company or refusing to talk with some Israeli professor. What makes Mencken’s observation apt here is that the Israel-Palestinian conflict is virtually the definition of a complex problem. In fact it is a complex problem that is itself part of a very much larger complex problem, or set of problems, that have bedeviled the vast territory of the Middle East for generations if not centuries. It is self-evident to anyone who knows the region that the political, social, religious and economic strains of the Middle East reflect deep set structural problems that were institutionalized by the British and the French in the wake of the collapse of the Ottoman Turkish empire. But even that is an oversimplification since the British and French were already in the 1920’s dealing with a tumultuous region, a region which had been causing problems for the Turks themselves way before World War I. My point in saying the obvious is to highlight how profoundly naive it is to think that the Israel-Palestinian problem has taken shape as some isolated disturbance that can be addressed and solved in a simple, surgical and painless way. To approach the conflict from this position offers, á la Mencken, a clear and simple answer, that even on the very face of it, is wrong.

Even ignoring the historical dimension, it is easy to see that even logically, the BDS campaign, and its odd offspring the academic boycott, are based on at least three false premises. One is that what is happening today between Israelis and Palestinians is sufficiently similar to apartheid that once held sway in South Africa such that what applied to the one must perforce apply to the other. Now similes or metaphors can certainly be useful analytic and teaching tools as we all know from our own work as academicians, but at the end of the day we also all know that similes and metaphors are just that, similes and metaphors. Our job as academicians is to move from similes and metaphors to correct and accurate descriptions of the unique problem with which we are dealing. Now I have to admit that I am old enough to remember real apartheid and the campaigns against it. I even participated in some anti-apartheid protests as a college student. But anyone who knows the Middle East knows that real apartheid of South Africa was a quite different thing in content, history, form, context and everything else from what is happening in the Middle East today. Thus to state that what is happening in Israel and Palestine is apartheid is not only to posit a bad metaphor, but is to distort also the history and memory of the real apartheid that

once was. At the core of this false premise is that the step from metaphor to accurate description has not been accomplished, a monumental academic failure.

A second false premise is that the economic boycott of the union of South Africa brought down the apartheid regime. Again, this is not the place to go into a much needed critique of this revisionist (and simplistic) reading of history. No one in the BDS movement, as far as I am aware, has even made the feeblest of attempts to argue that economic (let alone academic) boycotts were a major force in bringing down the South African apartheid regime. It is simply asserted. In essence, BDS has created a mythology of the nature and death of South African apartheid and then based a policy on that myth. We are in essence being asked to accept on their word that if we repeat what they tell us happened then, we will get the exact same results today. There is of course no such iron law of history, even if the metaphor were apt and if boycotts did indeed end South African apartheid (which they did not). The takeaway point is that academics who hope to learn from history should at least study the history they claim to be learning from.

The third premise is that if you boycott Israelis in some fashion, you will force the State to its knees and compel it to acquiesce to your simple solution to their complex problem. This is the closest example I can think of as the old History of Religions category of ritual magic. The idea came out of the Second intifada and the Durban Conference in 2001. The initial shock of the “al-Aqsa” intifada” raised an enthusiastic, one might even say apocalyptic, expectation that the State of Israel was about to collapse and that the economic hit Israel was taking during the rioting could be given a fatal push by economic isolation. The facts on the ground, as we all know, went in the exact opposite direction; the Israel economy survived, recovered and even boomed. In the light of this reality, the economic boycott morphed into an attempt to get at “Israeli apartheid” through academic and cultural boycotts. The premise on which this refocusing is based is, of course, far-fetched even on the surface. In the meantime the intifada ended in inglorious defeat to the extent that intifadas as a strategy have come into question. Yet calls for academic boycotts continue on, in a ritualistically magic way. Oddly, for academics, this is happening not so much in the absence of data as in contradiction to the data.

In short, in attempting to solve the complex problem of Israel-Palestine, BDS offers a solution that is clear, simple and, yes, deeply wrong. Worse, it is keeping us from finding workable solutions.

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