BDS as a Mediator

Marcelo Svirsky
School of Humanities and Social Inquiry
University of Wollongong, Australia

Abstract
The Boycotts, Divestment and Sanctions (BDS) Movement is a global political campaign led by Palestinian civil society since 2005. Its official aim is to put pressure on Israel to radically change its policies towards Palestinians. Drawing on Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari’s political philosophy, this paper discusses the BDS movement by looking into its affective powers. In particular, it claims that, above all else, acting as a political mediator BDS weakens the predominance of the current assemblage of public discourses on Israel-Palestine.

Keywords
Palestine, Israel, BDS, Deleuze and Guattari, discourse, mediators, signs
To the established fictions that are always rooted in a colonist’s discourse, we oppose a minority discourse, with mediators.
—— Gilles Deleuze
“Negotiations”

I. Introduction

Not long ago the Palestinian cause appealed to be heard; today it demands to be addressed. It seeks not anymore to compete for truth but to delegitimise the sort of narrativism that allows the world to make of the Palestinian disaster a topic, a matter of political positions and preferences rather than a paradigmatic emergency that it must deal with. This is a battle to make gunpowder to be smelled and have destroyed cities to be seen, to contemplate what remains of destruction in the absence of opinion. This is a battle over how to sense the all too asymmetrical *status-quo* secured by Israel and backed by Empire. Hence, the crucial question put forward by this battle is if the ongoing balance of power on the ground should or should not condition whatever development of the current state of affairs about which, to say that Israel has the upper hand would be an understatement. In this battle over the perception of the status-quo, Palestinian civil society’s strategy is that of the discourse and politics of BDS—the “Boycotts, Divestment and Sanctions” campaign demanding to make Israel accountable of its longstanding oppressive policies against the Palestinian people. Just on the cusp of letting Israel to make the region from the Mediterranean Sea to the Jordan River a *one-state de facto* with near six million Palestinians held under apartheid conditions of sorts,1 it is worth taking a moment to evaluate the potential unsettling influence of BDS on our perception of the current asymmetrical distribution of power. BDS’ function as a *mediator,* this paper shows, facilitating a change in the ways we perceive the Palestinian question via a disruption of the current assemblage2 of dominant public discourses and attitudes on Israel-Palestine.3 The challenge is colossal, ambitious;

1 This number includes 4.5 million Palestinians held under military occupation in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip since 1967, and about 1.5 million Palestinians citizens of Israel who suffer different forms of racial segregation and discrimination since 1948.

2 I understand “assemblage,” in Deleuze and Guattari’s sense, as a “complex constellations of objects, bodies, expressions, qualities and territories that come together for varying periods of time to ideally create new ways of functioning” (Livesey 18).

3 By “dominant” I’m referring to the public expressions of this assemblage in the domains that have a direct impact on the conflict, namely, US led diplomacy and international relations, Western governments and some Arab political elites in the Middle East, and the Western media.
what is involved in it is nothing less than the rearticulation of our investment in the conflict *not* under the terms of the status-quo that Israel and the West seek to maintain.

It is politically naïve to claim that the entire problem of perception of the conflict is about knowing the right facts on the ground. According to this view, informing oneself directly or indirectly will suffice to transform people’s attitudes towards the Palestinian predicament. This is true in a very partial fashion; only the few embark in such processes of change with a readiness to be affected. Despite the substantial academic industry of knowledge informing us of the ways in which Jewish privilege in Israel has been hewn and maintained through the ethnic fragmentation of life—namely, through the ways in which the Palestinian people have been dispossessed of their right to have rights, particularly after the violence of 1948 that constituted, and led to the constitution of, the State of Israel—the world’s indifference towards the Palestinian claims remains mostly unaffected. Despite all the incriminating archival evidence, statistical indicators and new understandings of power relations, people manage to accommodate or elude such information. No disaster is seen as such: neither the settler-colonisation of Palestine launched at the end of the nineteenth century and the 1948 ethnic cleansing or Nakba that consolidated it, nor the occupation of the West Bank, Gaza and East Jerusalem since 1967, nor the persistent structural exclusion of the Palestinian citizens of Israel (Svirsky, *After Israel* 1-2). Nothing seems to alter the world’s principle of non-intervention. In regard to the perpetrators themselves, Ariella Azoulay rightly claims that Jewish-Israelis are trained by the regime not to see the disaster, not to perceive themselves as the cause of the disaster or as responsible for its outcome ("Thinking" 549–50); still less do Jewish-Israelis see the disaster as their own, even though it is the disaster that roots their privilege. As Azoulay explains, the disaster is turned into a non-disaster by transforming it into “a narrative from *their* point of view,” that is, the Palestinian point of view (“Thinking” 564). Thus, no ethnic cleansing of the Palestinians occurred in 1948, except from *their* point of view; no regime of military occupation has run wild in the West Bank and Gaza for almost half a century, except from *their* point of view; no racial discrimination defines the lives of the Palestinian citizens of Israel, except from *their* point of view; no massacre took place in Gaza in the summer of 2014, except from *their* point of view.

---

Civil society (including social media) as a more contested realm is not one such domain as it is precisely there where BDS is gaining traction.
Neglect towards the Palestinian disaster though, needs to be seen in global neo-liberal context. A growing attitude of trivialisation or suspicion towards human-made disasters functions in the background, lubricating the general inclination to accept Israel’s unremitting violations of international law uncritically (Tilley 79-220). Referring to the state of exception that has become the rule, Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben noted in an interview that one important mechanism in this global process is the way in which disaster is made to appear as something natural or normal. It appears natural and normal to the senses when it is deposed from its affective role as a threshold. Not that we perceive nothing objectionable in actual disasters, but it is characteristic of our age that, rather than featuring as a threshold marking an inevitable change, disaster is reduced to an ordinary limit, and our encounter with it is submitted to the logic of the “penultimate mechanism,” where disaster always appears as the last event before a change must occur (“The ultimate is when the assemblage must change its nature” (Deleuze and Guattari, A Thousand Plateaus 438)). The point is that as an ordinary limit, disaster might trigger disgust, but not thought – passing condemnation, but not intervention. “The intolerable is no longer a serious injustice, but the permanent state of a daily banality” (Deleuze, Cinema 2 169), or as Fredric Jameson recently stated, “Even increasing immiseration, and the return of poverty and unemployment on a massive world-wide scale, are scarcely matters of amazement for anyone” (125). Essentially, what is catastrophic about this state of affairs is our increasing invulnerability to sense disaster, our insensitivity to the pain disaster puts before us—our confidence in not being truly concerned with it. However, this is not a universal attitude and needs to be qualified. The “let them drown” policy that Europe seems to have adopted towards refugees fleeing by sea from Africa and Middle East from war, persecution, and poverty, illustrates that there are indeed sides to the insensitivity towards disaster. Namely, the perception of disaster is a racialised mechanism. This is the attitudinal lens through which the Palestinian or any non-white predicament is not seen or addressed. In the next section we explore the more specific discursive

---


5 For a discussion of “limits and thresholds,” see Deleuze and Guattari’s A Thousand Plateaus (438–40).

6 There are three basic reasons why Empire is made the address of these claims. Firstly, because the West has a historical responsibility for the continuing consequences of the partition of life in Africa, Middle East, Asia, and America that European colonisation caused. Secondly, the West is the address of these claims and expectations because it has at its disposal the wealth, the technology, and the control of international institutions (political and financial) capable of
and affective coordinates that impede perceiving the asymmetry of the conflict in Palestine in its full light, while the last section discusses the significance of the discourse and politics of BDS in relation to the entrenched perceptions on Israel-Palestine.

II. Israel’s shields

Indisputably, the fundamental political, military and financial backing protecting Israel’s settler-colonial project lies in its alliance with the United States (Petras 83-155). Indeed, as Sriram Ananth explains, “The [BDS] call understands that the political-economic sources of the oppression of Palestinians exist beyond the specific geographic boundaries of the state of Israel and the occupied Palestinian territories” (137). US aid to Israel is approximately one-third of the American foreign-aid budget and as Bassok reported last year in Haaretz, “Since it began in 1962, American military aid to Israel has amounted to nearly $100 billion. For the past decades the United States has been regularly transferring aid of about $3 billion annually. In recent years, the aid has been solely for defense purposes. Additionally, the US has been giving Israel generous military aid for projects that are important both to it and to Israel” (“US”).7 Since the end of World War II, no other country has received American aid as Israel (see also Sharp, US 1-14). The American unconditional support of Israel in the United Nations and other international organisations (Beauchamp) has in fact made the US into a full partner of Israel’s settler-colonial project, and undoubtedly, the Israel Lobby in the US has been a major force in the formation of relations that have secured this incredible level of financial and diplomatic support (see Mearsheimer and Walt 170-334).

Ties with the world through the arms and surveillance technology industry are becoming as well economically significant for Israel (Gordon), featuring the country in the first ten major arms exporters since 2009, to the point that today, Israel plays an important role in the global arms market as a uniquely positioned technological guru who not only produces but also tests the products it sells—tests carried out on Palestinian flesh in the laboratory of occupation (Feldman, see also Sadeh).8 Military strength though, cannot occur and thrive without its flip side, addressing disaster. And thirdly, because by knocking directly on Western doors, refugees force on the West the question of hospitality.

---

7 Israel’s annual budget for 2015 is $88 billion, from which the “defense” budget is $15 billion (Elis).
8 In his documentary on the Israeli military-industrial complex, Israeli filmmaker Yotam Feldman shows how the occupation of the West Bank and Gaza has become a business rather
subjectivity. As I stated elsewhere, the production of a faithful Jewish-Israeli subjectivity on the back of which the unsustainable mission of securing a Jewish exclusivist region is executed, is no less important than the production of tanks and fighter planes that spread fear and terror, and no less important than the technology that helps the Israeli army to control the lives of Palestinians through administrative domination, walls and separation barriers, checkpoints, and separate roads for Jews and Palestinians (Svirsky, *After Israel* 202). This is because, as Félix Guattari so lucidly explained, the production of subjectivity is the raw material for any and all production (Guattari and Rolnik, *Molecular* 38). The conclusion is that the material assemblages of bodies and interests—incarnated in the protection granted by Empire, in technological success, and in Jewish-Israeli subjectivity—shield and license the state of Israel to proceed with the subjugation of the Palestinian people.

However, material content does not assemble without implicating expression or what Deleuze and Guattari call “collective assemblages of enunciation” (*Thousand* 3-25; 75-110), that is, without the order of language that enact relations between bodies. Discourse and matter maintain complex relations of interdependence. Hence, statements about Israel are more than just forms of representation in public discourse but they are the ways by which political language “intervene in the world functioning to organise its social character” (Stratford 108). By affixing to language social usages (Patton, *Deleuze* 7), statements support particular ways of being, in so doing enhancing the affective powers of particular material relations. In the next paragraphs I unfold what I believe to be the basic constituents of the public discourses and attitudes that dominate the ways we think and talk about Israel-Palestine. Far from being dispassionate, these discourses fill the political space by manufacturing and grounding an exceptionalism that guarantees Israel’s impunity regardless of its questionable actions under international law. A safe, shielded idiomatic territory is the result of the interactions between these discourses, where the conversation about Israel-Palestine—in mainstream western media, academia, and policy circles—“is significantly rooted in an ideology of entrenched Orientalism” (Bakan and Abu-Laban 33), one that does
not favour, to say the least, a rational and multi-focused approach to the topic, in the process making the Palestinian predicament an arguable matter.

Not listed in any order of significance, we proceed now to describe the components of the current assemblage of public discourses on Israel-Palestine. It should be noted that each of these components is in itself a plurality of mutually dependent sub-sets; at the general level of the assemblage, the coherence of the system—giving it a “common sense”—is webbed by the transversal relations between the basic elements. One of the main components in this complex is what Ilan Pappé defines as “the idea of Israel:” “The images and narratives formulated by Zionist leaders and activists in the past, and Israeli Jewish intellectuals and academics in the present, present Israel as the inevitable, successful implementation of the European history of ideas” (The Idea 4). The consequence of the Western cultural perception of Israel as a civilisatory bastion in the midst of Arab barbarism is that it bolsters political alliances with Israel and indifference towards the Palestinian predicament (Cronin 14-33). Harsh as it may sound, the way to recruit Europe into the Israeli settler-colonial project was paved by six million victims, or to put it in Cronin words, “Bad conscience is no excuse for bad policy” (4-5). Indeed, the nationalist manipulation of the Jewish holocaust by the state of Israel was designed not only to infuse Jewish-Israelis with the hatred of the near at hand Arab as the perfect replacement of the unattainable Nazi, but it also shaped itself to exploit European guilt (Segev 421-487, Pappé, A History 174). The point is in the legacy of this manipulation: to create the indisputable idea that the Jewish state is the most righteous response to the Holocaust. Folded in this idea, we find a warning: any critique of the Jewish state comes close to a denial of the Holocaust.

“The idea of Israel” surely anchors Israel as a European appendix, but no less importantly, it provides a mythology of the conflict itself that helps protect the Israeli settler-colonial project (Chomsky and Pappé 5-14). As Pappé explains, “The wide acceptance in the world of the Zionist narrative is based on a cluster of mythologies that, in the end, cast doubt on the Palestinians’ moral right, ethical behavior, and the chances for any just peace in the future” (Chomsky and Pappé 5). According to Pappé, these myths provide a distorted history of the conflict by essentially, (a) erasing from world memory the causal role of Zionism as a settler-colonial project of dispossession and expulsion of the native Palestinian population (Masalha, Expulsion; Land 125-200), a cause that explains as well the circumstances around the creation of the state of Israel that led to the ethnic cleansing of the Palestinian people (Pappé, Ethnic) and also its current policies, and (b) by portraying Israel as the victim of Palestinian violence and the side that finds
itself compelled to react. And “once accepted as a truth, these mythologies become a justification not so much for the Israeli actions, but for the West’s inclination to interfere” (Chomsky and Pappé 5).

Another aspect that characterises the current debates about Israel relates to its arguable claim to be both a democracy and a Jewish racial state. My intention is not to engage with this unnecessary discussion but to note that, as a matter of fact, this debate does not necessarily damage Israel’s image in the eyes of Western audiences because it takes place alongside conversations and actual policy-change in the West as more and more people are now considered excess and become abandoned (Giroux, Giroux and Evans). In other words, Israel’s partial use of democratic procedures and institutions and the ways by which it makes them concomitant with military occupation, apartheid and deep forms of discrimination has a great appeal to Western governments and parliaments interested in experimenting with the pauperisation of democracy by way of deepening their own “states of exception” (Agamben). In this sense Israel has become a paradigmatic test case. Hence, one needs to understand the motto “the only democracy in the Middle East” frequently used by Western politicians when referring to Israel, not as an attempt to disingenuously market a false image but in fact, as an omen of their own societies. Therefore, as irritating as it may be for believers of democratic ideals, within some domains of international political power the debate on Israel’s alleged democracy is granting in fact more legitimacy to Israel as a Jewish state.

Another major cornerstone in the maintenance of the status quo is the unceasing effort to keep alive “peace negotiations” and principally, the talk about it. Diplomacy has given so far very little to the Palestinians (Reinhart, Road 13–87) so it will not be exaggerating to claim that “negotiations” tuned into the watchword for the continuation of the oppression of the Palestinian people. As Lisa Taraki states, “Diplomacy as a strategy for achieving Palestinian rights has proven to be futile, due to the protection and immunity Israel enjoys from hegemonic world powers and those in their orbit” (Taraki and LeVine 165). The idea of diplomatic negotiations has a strong rational appeal to dialogue believers, not just because it seems right to encourage dialogue between parties in conflict, but also because the imposition of a dialogical framework releases observers from the cognitive-affective call to come to grips with the terrible asymmetry that characterises the conflict which makes any dialogue suspicious if not totally redundant and damaging. “Dialogue,” Taraki adds, “is often framed in terms of ‘two sides to the story,’ in the sense that each side must

---

9 Something of this appeal is represented in the way Israel’s ‘walls’ play a role in the movie World War Z (2013).
understand the pain, anguish, and suffering of the other, and to accept the narrative of the other. This presents the ‘two sides’ as if they were equally culpable, and deliberately avoids acknowledgment of the basic coloniser-colonised relationship. Dialogue does not promote change, but rather reinforces the status quo” (Taraki and LeVine 166).

Unofficial proxies—members of Jewish communities, leaders of Zionist and Jewish organisations, and pro-Israel academics and journalists—as well as formal representatives of Israel have been traditionally voicing these discourses outside the country. However, the defense of Israel overseas became a difficult enterprise since the first Intifada (1981-1991) and ever more because of the brutal violence Israel used during the second (2000-2005), and since then. It was at this point that Israel made “Hasbara” (elsewhere defined as public diplomacy) an official business of the government. “Hasbara” in Hebrew means ‘explaining and campaigning’ to counter negative judgments of Israel in the press, social media, academia and other public realms.10 An official campaign named “Brand Israel” was launched in 2005, “to recast and rebrand the country’s image so as to appear relevant and modern instead of militaristic and religious” (Pappé, The Idea 299). 11 Hasbara campaigns are funded primarily by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Jewish Agency and sorts of Zionist and Jewish foundations outside Israel. These efforts became a matter of “security” after the first signs of international intervention appeared when the International Court of Justice in The Hague ruled against Israel’s apartheid wall in 2004, and after the BDS campaign started to get public attention. The mission for the Brand Israel team became thus defined:

How do we change perceptions? How do we introduce nuance into global conversations surrounding Israel? How do we discuss the highlights and achievements of Israeli society, while also recognising its weaknesses and shortcomings? What needs to happen to remove

---

10 Israel takes these efforts very seriously, to the point that it lately recruits University students in Israel and the US by way of granting fellowships. In the promotional flyer to these fellowships Prime Minister Netanyahu states: “The critical factor in shaping the foreign policy of the United States is public opinion. American public opinion is one asset that we need to nurture all of the time, because public opinion will prevent any government from turning on Israel. It will also make a friendly government friendlier. One of my main efforts will be the nurturing of American public opinion. And to nurture that public opinion we need to persuade Americans of the justice of our case” (see http://www.hasbarafellowships.org/uploads/HF%20Fellowship%20Proposal%202018.pdf).

11 For a more comprehensive take on ‘Brand Israel’ see Pappé, The Idea 295-313.
Israel from the bright spotlight of a violent conflict? (Pappé, *The Idea* 301; italics added)

The fundamental difference between the discursive components mentioned so far and this new species of ideological language is that Brand Israel avoids the argumentative dimension of the conflict. The mythology of the conflict, the manipulation of the Holocaust, the “negotiation” discourse, and the debate around Israel’s democracy—these components in the assemblage of public discourses are about proving Israel right, about an advocacy that aspires to win the affective and moral dimension of the conflict. Brand Israel, in contrast, markets Israel to show how the country has contributed to “the advancement of health-care, the environment, technology, culture, and global democratic values worldwide” (Pappé, *The Idea* 301), and to do so by isolating the talk about these achievements from the conflict itself, so in Brand Israel stories there are no Palestinians. Brand Israel specific campaigns range from financed tours to Israel for Western politicians and other public figures\(^\text{12}\) to show them everything but the landscapes of the occupation, film or book festivals in Western metropolises, organised conversations with the community (particularly Jewish congregations), publication of opinion letters in wide-distribution newspapers and websites, to the propagation of ideas that give Israel the image of a cultured nation and a progressive reputation as a human rights devotee. Amongst the latter, the national rebranding machines are invested in using the LGBTQ community to portray Israel as a safe haven for its members. This has been called “pinkwashing” Israel, an attempt to use progressive politics—“the cynical promotion of LGBT bodies as representative of Israeli democracy” (Puar, “Rethinking Homonationalism” 338)—with the purpose of concealing state crimes. But unexpectedly, as Jasbir Puar explains, “In portraying itself as the only gay-friendly country in a homophobic region the Israeli state reveals its own desperation” (“Israel’s”). This particular strand of Brand Israel does not shy away from having Palestinians in the debate; however, by contrasting itself to a negative image of the Palestinians, the strategy has tangible political aims, to “dilute solidarity with the Palestinian cause by reiterating the terms upon which Israel justifies its violence: Palestinians are too backwards, uncivilised, and unmodern to have their own state, much less treat homosexuals properly” (Puar, “Israel’s”).

\(^{12}\) This is in addition to a vast industry that encourages organised and guided tours for Jewish youth with the aim of securing political support of Jewish communities outside Israel. Under the general management of the Jewish Agency, these programmes, tailored mainly for Western Jews, offer a week-long visit to Israel as well as longer ones—up to a year (see Shapiro 50-98, Fernandez).
Lately, the new Israeli government has come to a strategic decision to escalate its response to BDS. A special budget and a range of new governmental positions have been allocated at the Ministry of Strategic Affairs to fight against BDS, and Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has recently declared BDS as a threat against which all political parties in Israel should stand together.\(^\text{13}\) These efforts are being echoed overseas. Netanyahu’s major American donor, multi-billionaire Sheldon Anderson, has convened a closed-door meeting in early June 2015 in Las Vegas to find new ways to combat BDS in American universities where there has been an increasing support for the campaign.\(^\text{14}\)

“Global international relations matter,” Puar rightly states (“Rethinking Homonationalism” 338). Hence, there exists a global arena where the struggle over the perception of the conflict takes place. Israel’s discursive dominance in this arena cannot be overstated. Its self-sufficiency, the repetitive hearsay conveying what must be said, the refusal to find points of departure outside itself that might enrich and transform it—these are the symptoms of the reactionary character of the dominant discourse about Israel-Palestine that we find everywhere in the media, academia and public and private everyday conversations. Exasperatingly, it keeps spiralling back and forth around its well-known statements, bewitched, and bewitching. It is in the character of this discursive territory to diminish and attempt to swallow whatever forces, of any kind, that might test or challenge it, as if in a black hole. The frustration and helplessness felt whenever we engage with this sort of conversation about Israel-Palestine are the signs of an autistic and intolerant discourse.

Importantly, Israel and its supporters do not limit the circulation of these discourses to a defensive strategy, and in fact, they also both attack critics and prevent the critique of Israel. Jewish and Zionist organisations in the diaspora have become significant in these roles. Few examples will suffice: “In summer 2014, sparked by the events in Gaza the well-respected Tricycle Theatre in North London asked the Jewish Film Festival which it was due to host not to accept financial support provided by the Israeli Embassy” (Yudkin). The theatre felt that to accept such funding in current circumstances would be to compromise its political neutrality. Then, “[a] public campaign against Tricycle was launched by a pro-Israeli group ‘Campaign against Antisemitism,’ leading to threats of withdrawal by funders and to statements by politicians including the then Culture Secretary Sajid


Javid linking the decision to anti-Semitism” (Yudkin). What is more, only in the first half of 2015 two academic conferences in the UK which intended to discuss Israel-Palestine in a critical manner were cancelled by the institutions themselves (Imperial College London in March, and the University of Southampton in April); these decisions were adopted by the Universities in response to intense pressure of what is called the “Israeli lobby” in the UK (see Langford, Derfner, Bar-Hillel). In May 2015 two non-profit organisations, “Palestine Solidarity Legal Support” and the “Center for Constitutional Rights (CCR)” in the US jointly reported that in the first four months of 2015 were documented 60 incidents involving accusations of anti-Semitism and 24 incidents involving accusations of support for terrorism, made against students or faculty in American universities, based solely on speech critical of Israeli policy and in favour of Palestinian rights (Nessel). As Maria LaHood, deputy legal director at the Center for Constitutional Rights says, “False accusations of anti-Semitism are being employed as a strategy to pressure campus authorities to suppress speech that is critical of Israel” (Nessel). We find a common theme here: “the attempt to selectively curtail the range of views that may be expressed. The shared modus operandi has been to suppress criticism of Israel’s actions and policies by alleging an anti-Semitic bias” (Yudkin).

On a more ontological level, the dominant discourses on Israel-Palestine need to be conceived not as truthful representations of what can be thought and what can be said and done about the broader themes they refer to, but as specific actualisations of these themes, or to put it in Deleuzian terms, as actualisations of virtual Ideas or dimensions (see Deleuze, Difference).15 The actual idea of Israel as an European enclave is a specific solution to or a stratification of the virtual dimension of Orientalism, understood as the problem of how the West thinks the East; the series of myths that distort the history of Palestine to position Israel in a positive perspective is the Zionist take on post-modern narrativism and relativism; the manipulation of the Jewish Holocaust and its relation to the justification of the Jewish state is Israel’s restrictive and specific answer to the question or problem of anti-Semitism or even more broadly, to racism; the pauperisation of democracy implied in the debates on the “Jewish and democratic” statement is the way the problem of abandonment and exceptionalism is actualised; dialogue and diplomatic negotiations are invoked to resolve “conflict” though they have so far only

15 In Deleuzian terms, the real comprises the actual and the virtual, and importantly, they are inevitably interconnected; they impregnate each other. “[T]he actual and the virtual are different kinds of being,” their inter-relations explaining becomings of life (Bignall 107).
congealed Israel’s advantages; and lastly, while the Brand Israel project speaks Israel’s modernism, pinkwashing actualises the paradigm of homonationalism.\footnote{According to Puar the concept is an analytic to comprehend a particular structure of modernity, a shift that marks the entrance of homosexual bodies as worthy of protection by nation states (see Puar, \textit{Terrorist}).}

In Deleuzian ontology, problems have material and discursive actualisations or particular solutions that never exhaust them; this is “because there always remains the possibility of other specifications and other solutions” (Patton, \textit{Deleuzian} 113). As Simone Bignall explains, “the virtuality internal to actual being suggests questions that might guide transformation: what different components could be included?” (113), or to put it slightly differently, how thresholds can be surpassed and current compositions of statements and ideas disassembled in new actualisations of virtual dimensions? Again, the dominant discourses on Israel-Palestine represent nothing; rather, they are actualities drawing “upon the potential of the virtual whilst at the same time moving away from it” (Lundborg 69), partially and provisionally actualising some aspects of it. Having said so, something external to these discursive actualities keeps them circulating their “truths”; this is the force of resonance effects between the internal elements of the discourses and across the discourses themselves. These are forms of “communication” bestowing a sense of coherence and stability upon social messages. By communication I mean the reciprocal transference of specific logics, mechanisms and affects that animate the discourses on Israel-Palestine. Together, these discourses “vibrate” at the same frequency or, in other words, they resonate together. From this point of view, it may make quite a lot of sense to claim that if we are prone to think of Israel as a sort of European space, then the distance from there to engage in a belief in Israel’s mythology of the conflict, on its modernism, and to prioritise the Jewish state as the inexorable answer to the Holocaust—that distance is indeed very short and easy to walk through, affectively speaking. Resonance enables these discourses to be felt as related, literally making a discursive and affective territory by weaving together rationalities, meanings, expectations and interpretations. If Israel has any ‘general’ interest, it is to retain this territory inhabited by us.

However, during the last decade, we are witnessing the fruits of critical Palestinian scholarship and that of post-Zionism, which with the contribution of the BDS campaign worldwide are slowly changing the way we tend to think about the region, and thus, deterritorialising our affections in relation to the dominant discursive territory on Israel-Palestine. Given the current assemblage of public discourses and attitudes on Israel-Palestine, the next section tries to answer the
question of how BDS rhetoric and practices take part in a process of becoming that shifts elements of that assemblage of enunciation into something else.

III. Mediators and Signs

Materially and discursively shielded as it is, Israel has no real incentive—either internally or externally—to change its positions. Take the cultural infrastructure of the Jewish state in terms of its overwhelming commitment to racism, war, segregation and Jewish privilege (see Svirsky, After Israel), and add to it the material, political and ideological support of the Western powers on which Israel relies to maintain its settler colonial project (in particular that of whatever American administration)—together, these two dynamics substantiate the status quo and perpetuate Israel’s ability not to conduct political negotiations with a sincere historical vision of justice. Clearly, in the absence of any genuine Israeli compromise, the reality of Palestinian subjugation—which is also the reality of the subjugation of Israelis to a life of war and racism—cannot be challenged until the reality of the balance of power is somehow disrupted. As BDS Palestinian leader Omar Barghouti unmistakably states:

Palestinians cannot wait. Israel is no longer “just” guilty of occupation, colonization, and apartheid against the people of Palestine; . . . it has embarked on what seems to be its final effort to literally disappear the “Palestinian problem.” And it is doing so with utter impunity. . . . Thus BDS. Thus now. (Boycotts 47)

Inspired by the struggle against South African apartheid, in July 2005 a coalition of 170 Palestinian civil-society organisations—representative of Palestinian civil society within the occupied territories of the West Bank and Gaza, the territory of Israel, and the diaspora—called on the international community to endorse measures of boycotts, divestment and sanctions against the state of Israel until the latter,

meets its obligation to recognize the Palestinian people’s inalienable right to self-determination and fully complies with the precepts of international law by: (1) Ending its occupation and colonization of all Arab lands and dismantling the Wall; (2) Recognizing the fundamental rights of the Arab-Palestinian citizens of Israel to full
equality; and (3) Respecting, protecting and promoting the rights of Palestinian refugees to return to their homes and properties as stipulated in UN resolution 194.\footnote{See BDS National Committee (2005), Palestinian United Call for Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions against Israel, 9 July 2005. http://www.bdsmovement.net/?q=node/52.}

As Maia Carter Hallward rightly describes, “The BDS Call was groundbreaking in several regards: first, it signaled a clear break from the widespread use of violence in the second intifada . . . Second, the call brought together not only Palestinians from the West Bank and Gaza Strip but also Palestinian refugees and Palestinians with Israeli citizenship” (2). In practice, BDS calls on us to reject relations—through boycotts (including academic and cultural), divestment and sanctions—with Israeli and other international institutions and companies involved in the perpetuation of apartheid, settler-colonialism, military occupation and discriminatory policies against all three sectors of the Palestinian people. As Taraki explains:

The basic logic of BDS is the logic of pressure—not diplomacy, persuasion, or dialogue. Diplomacy as a strategy for achieving Palestinian rights has proved futile, due to the protection and immunity Israel enjoys from hegemonic world powers and those in their orbit. Second, the logic of persuasion has also shown its bankruptcy, since no amount of “education” of Israelis about the horrors of occupation and other forms of oppression seems to have turned the tide. Dialogue between Israelis and Palestinians, which remains very popular among Israeli liberals and Western foundations and governments that fund the activities, has also failed miserably . . . Dialogue does not promote change, but rather reinforces the status quo, and in fact is mainly the interest of the Israeli side of the dialogue, since it makes Israelis feel that they are doing something, while in fact they are not. (Taraki and LeVine 165-66)

Perhaps because of its relative newness, the theorisation of the BDS international campaign as a form of transnational activism is in its infancy.\footnote{However, Maia Carter Hallward makes an important empirical contribution by relying on literature on transnational activism and fieldwork; see also Sriram Ananth, and Bakan and Abu-Laban.} Also, the available literature on the South-African anti-apartheid movement from which
BDS draws its inspiration has not been properly recruited and adapted (e.g. Crawford and Klotz, Guelke, Clark and Worger). Yet, some authors have analysed different aspects of the BDS movement, particularly the question of its legitimacy, its strategies, contradictions, achievements and difficulties. In what follows, the paper proposes to think BDS as a form of political mediator that helps re-envision and re-interpret the landscape of disaster through a process of semiotic transformation. As Deleuze explains:

Mediators are fundamental. Creation is all about mediators . . . Whether they’re real or imaginary, animate or inanimate; you have to form your mediators. It’s a series. If you’re not in some series, even a completely imaginary one, you’re lost. I need my mediators to express myself, and they’d never express themselves without me: you’re always working in a group, even when you seem to be on your own. (“Mediators” 125)

Basically, mediators have a role in the subjective production of new perceptions and statements, and they do have such a role because they intervene between the subject and the world, but not to bridge between them, not to facilitate a conceived beforehand synthesis and interpretations. Rather, the mediator plots to re-orient the encounter (Brott 139) by installing a language that forces the participants in the encounter to recede from their given identities and representations as they are made redundant to the exchange. That’s the mediator capacity. It is precisely this role that the global BDS performs in the effort to redirect our perceptions of the disaster inflicted upon Palestine by Zionism. Mediators intercede in the encounter by re-defining its terms and thus producing new signs that augur the opening of political spaces. It is either that we remain trapped in associative chains that lead the mind to look for always-already enacted contents (of statements and attitudes) and therefore it can be said that an encounter or a problem has been evaded; or a sign does emerge as the result of experimentation, and therefore it can be said that something thrown upon us in the encounter affects our composition and we are forced to re-evaluate our historical

---

19 There is already a long list of works the reader can access on BDS: Audrea Lim’s (ed.) *The Case for Sanctions Against Israel* (2012); Omar Barghouti’s *BDS: Boycott, Divestment, Sanctions: The Global Struggle for Palestinian Rights* (2011); Mazin B. Qumsiyeh’s *Popular Resistance in Palestine* (2011); S. F. McMahon, “The Boycott, Divestment, Sanctions campaign: contradictions and challenges” (2014); G. Slovo “An interview with Omar Barghouti” (2014). This list does not include the books and articles against BDS.
coordinates, our attachments and anchors in the world. For Deleuze signs are affects, and are never given a priori but are triggered in the encounter between subjects and the world. As such, it is their nature to unleash violence on thought; they trigger thought to embark on interpretation: “There is always the violence of a sign that forces us into the search, which robs us of peace” (Proust and Signs 15-16). “Something distinguishes itself” (Deleuze, Difference 28), and as it produces a sign, thought might be evoked. It is for this reason that the sign always carries a political charge; it envelops the accomplices in the encounters with a difference that forces them to rethink the status-quo: “The exterior world becomes interesting the moment it produces signs, thereby losing its reassuring unity, its homogeneity, its truthful appearance” (Zourabichvili 67).

From the point of view of sensitivity, our encounters with the world may end up unproductively—without a rupture, as a result of the presence of barriers either at the level of how our opportunities to have an encounter are structured, or at the level of how we face those opportunities. In Proust and Signs Deleuze articulates these two dimensions as follows: “To be sensitive to signs, to consider the world as an object to be deciphered, is doubtless a gift. But this gift risks remaining buried in us if we do not make the necessary encounters, and these encounters would remain ineffective if we failed to overcome certain stock notions” (26-27; emphasis added). The distinction between these two dimensions helps clarify whence conditions may transcend the given. In fact, something significant weds these two dimensions together, namely, the tracking down of the negatives—the “enemies that prevent the genesis of thought: convention, opinion, clichés, stupidity” (Smith 91; see also 379 n9).

As for the first dimension (the structure of opportunities to have encounters), in Critical and Clinical Deleuze says that, consciously or not, we often tend to avoid new encounters and mixtures led by brute social imperatives (144). In other words, the sorts of encounters we have are mostly consonant with norms, discourses and expectations constructed through processes of socialisation and subjectification. This is not news for frustrated activists invested in the effort to widen the circles of people willing to experiment with the problematic. However, it is beyond the scope of this paper to discuss the practical policies of the different BDS chapters around the world in terms of how activists strategise to create new opportunities for people to encounter their messages and activities. In this sense, serious reservations have been heard against BDS as premature, pointing as Chomsky did, that “the necessary educational work has not been done” and therefore, “the efforts are and will be ineffective in countering the international consensus on the conflict and US power
in maintaining it” (“On Israel-Palestine and BDS”). This realpolitik critique seems as preaching to the choir because educational work is one of the most important aspects of BDS activists; so, perhaps it is too soon to appreciate the depth of this work but it does not make any sense to disqualify BDS because, as it were, it is too soon to appreciate its success.

The second dimension in which we find explanations of why encounters with the world might end up unproductively, without movement, has to do with the tools with which we face the encounter. It is within this dimension that it appears that BDS is making a difference. The fundamental barrier at this level is to be found in the natural behaviour of the mind. In *Difference and Repetition*, Deleuze explains at length that the mind finds itself for the most part in “concordia facultatum”—slumbering in a harmony of the faculties—rather than carried away into terra incognita by a process of pure creation that involves new interpretations (129-67).  

In fact, as Zourabichvili states, “if thought thinks only under the condition of an encounter, it is ‘naturally’ in a state of torpor” (58). In other words, thought is not necessarily a natural disposition or operation of the mind, but “there is a fortuitous and contingent incitation derived from an encounter” (Zourabichvili 56). “To think means to experiment and to problematize,” writes Deleuze in his *Foucault* book (116). Thought—the operation in the mind that is triggered by signs—is a responsive act of problematisation because it responds to the forces that arise from the indeterminacy of problems, or better, from the indeterminacy that the problem stirs. As James Williams explains:

> It is a sign that forces us to think with a problem. The force of the problem, as independent of the questions and solutions of recognition, is that it goes beyond any past solutions stored in memory. It is a problem because it does not yet have a solution and because it does not even allow for solutions that cancel it out. (121)

What the problem problematises, facilitated and communicated by the sign, is our personalised point of view. “One does not think,” explains Zourabichvili, “except by arriving at a point of view, by changing points of view” (71). However, a significant point of view is not the subject’s point of view. To say that everything is relative to the viewpoint of the subject is redundant, reflecting nothing but a banal

---

20 Deleuze bases this diagnosis on Plato’s distinction between two types of sensation, “those that leave the mind tranquil and inactive, and those that force it to think” (Smith 89).
The problem with positing disaster—or any other manifestation of reality—as a mere “variation of truth according to the subject” (Deleuze, *The Fold* 20) is that truth becomes catholically wedded to recognisable identities. In this case, the disaster itself is deprived of its capacity to affect beyond narrativist affiliations and understandings chained to habitual and predictable forms of perception. Is not world public opinion saturated, clogged up, with the same approaches to and points of view on Israel-Palestine which offer nothing but futile controversy? Different points of view are connected through vector-forces: “Thought becomes active because it experiences a relation of forces between points of view” (Zourabichvili 73). This is how we encounter the outside, by being involuntarily forced to be affected by forces, ultimately bringing about new statements. Becoming sensitive to an outside means, in fact, becoming sensitive to a difference between points (of view) that the problem sets before us, thus contaminating our present composition and relation to the world with movement.

We claim that BDS shifts the conversation about Israel-Palestine from the dominant assemblage of discourses and attitudes by way of two significant methods that induce thought. One is by assembling a political language that takes existent thresholds as objects of transgression. In so doing, BDS reveals the structures that underpin the relationships between knowledge and power. This is, by the way, one junction at which Deleuze and Foucault’s concerns meet. The second method by which BDS induces thought is by imposing a new method of negotiation. Taking from Azoulay, BDS needs to be thought as a civil language of change, “different and separate from that of the sovereign power, a language that requires the creation of a new political contract . . . this language . . . used repeatedly, make[s] a difference each time, sometimes even creating a new local idiom” (“Language”).

**BDS and thresholds:** we start from the declared principles/demands in the BDS Call. This Call explicitly raises a demand to correct the fate of the three sectors of the Palestinian people: it demands to end the occupation of the West Bank and Gaza, to endorse the principle of equality for the Palestinian citizens of Israel, and to recognise and apply the right of return of the Palestinian refugees. No wonder Israel’s government has defined BDS as an existential threat. The reason the BDS Call touches on Israelis’ nerves lies in the fact that in essence, it addresses what I have called elsewhere Israel’s state curriculum (Svirsky, *After Israel* 179).

---

21 On Deleuze’s perspectivism see Gregory Flaxman’s “A More Radical Empiricism” (2015).
22 As Zourabichvili explains, there is “sensitivity to signs only on the basis of a rupture of the sensory-motor schema by means of which representations are produced” (86).
Israeli society has developed a series of projects, all related to its aspiration to create an exclusivist Jewish state: the prevention of Palestinian return; tyrannical military oppression of Palestinians in the West Bank, and Gaza; the internal exclusion from governance and full equality of the state’s Palestinian citizens; and the structural inhibition of Arab-Jewish collaborative life. These are Israel’s national projects—together, its state curriculum. This is what makes Israel the state it is, and therefore, it makes perfect sense to claim that we should interrogate into Israel’s very legitimacy to operate as such a state. Simply put, BDS positions the Palestinian predicament as the other side—or the historical meaning—of Israel’s fundamental character: “What the BDS movement represents, and is calling for, is a transformative praxis of emancipatory resistance that matches the evolving socio-spatial apparatus of oppression” (Ananth 137; emphasis added). Thus, after BDS, the Palestinian problem can no longer be divided up into discrete and unconnected units—refugees, occupation, racism, military violence—as if these were minor issues that could be somehow adjusted within the present Israeli regime through inconsequential alterations. In a word, BDS encourages thinking Israel-Palestine with a Foucauldian “analytic of the limit” (MacKenzie) that helps expose categories and means of exclusion to foster a critical understanding of the structure. Constructively, BDS rhetoric is not just about crossing thresholds for the sake of transgression but it lays down a tactical entrance into a new “outside” that parts ways with settler-colonialism.

In this sense BDS’s detractors are partially right on at least one thing. Plainly, the BDS Call—addressing the tripartite system of oppression—is nothing but a strategic appeal to delegitimise Israel as the kind of state it is—both ideologically and behaviourally. And this is exactly why BDS shocks Zionists and other supporters of Israel. For it is one thing to demand adjustments (leaving Israel’s sense of righteousness and its political, cultural and economic apparatuses intact, namely letting live the status quo), but an entirely different thing is to question the marrow of Israel’s character. For a political space saturated with passionate Holocaust-pinned justifications of the Jewish state as much as infused with a-priori judgements of Palestinian violence, it is just inconceivable to place Israel in the defendant’s chair. Thus, BDS’s detractors are right in claiming that it addresses Israel as a whole, that it targets its very essence. But they are defamatory when they claim that BDS aims at the physical destruction of Israel and of Israelis. As Barghouti put it,

---

23 It is common to pro-Israel supporters to link the claim/debate on the legitimacy of Israel’s character with the issue of “Israel’s right to exist.” Ben White answers to this in an unmistakable
Would justice and equal rights for all really destroy Israel? Did equality destroy the American South? Or South Africa? Certainly, it destroyed the discriminatory racial order that had prevailed in both places, but it did not destroy the people or the country (“Why Israel”).

There is one more sense in which BDS’s detractors are right in their claim that its actions and messages have a strategic impact on Israel, and this lies in the dynamics of the BDS movement. BDS will have a long-term influence in the future reconstruction of the region because it opens up an opportunity to experiment, to reconstitute our subjectivities through new political imaginations. This is particularly important for Palestinians and for those Israelis who choose to join the Palestinian Call for boycotts.

**BDS and a new method of negotiation**: at work here a double movement of capture; from one flank, because it focuses on the structures of Israeli oppression in their entirety, BDS rhetoric builds a sense of political urgency that calls the world to sense and address the Palestinian predicament. But as it positions bodies to become sensitive to the Palestinian predicament, from the other flank it prevents their encounter with the dominant assemblage of public discourses by imposing a speech that is deaf to them. BDS takes a stand in relation to that dominant assemblage, it disengages, takes no part in its conversations, it creates a critical distance from it, attacking from the outside—besieging it. BDS rejects all accusations of anti-Semitism, and embraces the question of the Holocaust without inhibitions by adding its own critique to the abuse of the Holocaust by Israel. BDS places itself beyond the efforts of diplomacy to press on “negotiations” by emphasising the biased historical accountancy of international intervention. And without blinking, it rejects the disingenuous invitation to dialogue with Israelis at the time it opens its doors to all Israelis to join the campaign—this is the basis for reconciliation. Thus, as Ananth states, BDS “puts the oppressor on the defensive by going on the offensive, framing the conditions of liberation rather than having them framed by the oppressor” (141). Thus, to the international community’s demand that diplomatic negotiations between the Palestinian Authority and Israel should resume,
BDS responds with actions on the ground by raising the price of Israeli oppression,\(^{25}\) which in fact ridicules the negotiation process in itself; to the expectation of “mutual recognition” BDS clearly rejects any recognition of Israel that would accept its oppressive and genocidal character; in response to the enthusiasm the Palestinian Authority provoked around the world by signing the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court, BDS stresses that it is not in the Washington-dominated international organisations that the struggle will find its answers but in popular support through global solidarity.

This double articulation sets the stage for BDS to table an alternative form of negotiation. While Israel finds comfort in the dominant discourses on Israel-Palestine, restricting change to a method of negotiation that is solely about managing the present order of things, BDS pushes for a method of negotiation—a conversation—that will expose the problem in its entirety, in all its dimensions, in its historicity and not just in its actuality. As Deleuze notes, “once the problem has been set out, we can no longer get away from it” (“Mediators” 127). And yet, propped up by all sorts of fundamentalists—the US government, evangelists of all kinds, European orientalists and Jewish Diasporas stuck in the past—Israel refuses to recognise the truth of its situation. Precisely because of this unprecedented stubbornness the response is not to pretend anymore as if we were unaware of the real stakes of the situation. BDS sets instead the final outcome: there will be no more settler-colonialism, no more apartheid, and no more racial discrimination between “the Sea and the River.” “We are going to recognize the outcome right away, and negotiations will take place in the light of this outcome set in advance; we will negotiate ways and means, the speed of change” (Deleuze, “Mediators” 126). Namely, BDS forces us to reject the method of negotiation defined as a problem of redistribution that conforms to the management of the status-quo, and instead, it presents the conflict as a problem of historical justice. A new method of negotiation is always about a new political language that forces on the colonist the question he refuses.

IV. Afterword

The uniqueness of BDS lies in its power of affection to challenge the habitual forms through which we become interested in, concerned with, and talk about

\(^{25}\) For a comprehensive list of BDS’ successful campaigns see the BDS website: http://www.bdsmovement.net/.
events in Israel-Palestine. It provides us with a political language to re-express ourselves on the issue of Israel-Palestine—“having found mediators I can say what I have to say” (Deleuze, “Mediators” 125). It is this new political language that intercedes—as a collective agency—in the encounter with disaster, mediating between current perceptions and new sensations, affecting. It creates an opportunity to extract ourselves from the reactionary and passive blocs of observers and participants to become a collective body of enunciation (Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus* 83), a new configuration that is already taking place worldwide. For those who believe they can just come up with a discourse of their own, Deleuze reminds us that they “won’t get away from a ‘master’s or colonialist’s discourse,’ an established discourse” (“Negotiations” 125). “Brand Israel” stories, the mythology of the conflict, holocaustic guilt—they are around the corner—ready to ambush you the reader, depicting Israel “as a heaven on earth, a dream come true . . . identified with beauty, fun and technological achievement . . . the new version of the idea of Israel” (Pappé, *The Idea* 300). But, “to the established fictions that are always rooted in a colonialist’s discourse, we oppose a minority discourse, with mediators” (Deleuze, “Mediators” 126).

BDS is not a principle, nor a programme for building a new society, but a mediatory tactic. Therefore, we should not be surprised that BDS refrains from stating a clear recommendation for a “political solution” for Israel-Palestine. As a political function, it is a tactical machine designed to exert pressure on the world and on Israeli society by raising the price Israelis and others have to pay for the continuing oppression of Palestinians—a pressure that will eventually end up by changing the balance of power in ways that will force the Israeli leadership to comply with international law and the particular requirements for a just peace, either through the creation of new conditions of negotiation or unilaterally. As Barghouti states, “It’s not a comfortable position to be in and we don’t want Israelis to be in a comfortable position; we want them to think, to consider that there is a price to be paid for their state’s crimes and denial of human rights against the Palestinians and for their deafening silence and prevalent complicity” (Slovo 39). Interceded by the activist machines of BDS, a new encounter is being manufactured on the Israel-Palestine plane of thought and action, forcing observers and

---

26 By “power of affection,” in line with Deleuze and Spinoza, I mean the power to affect other bodies. As Deleuze explains in his lectures on Spinoza: “In a first determination, an affection is the following: it’s a state of a body insofar as it is subject to the action of another body . . . it’s an affection of your body. What is an affection of your body? Not the sun, but the action of the sun or the effect of the sun on you. In other words an effect or the action that one body produces on another” (“Letters”).
participants on this plane to sense the Palestinian predicament. As a result, new mixtures between these bodies arise, and new interpretations and significances redefine the conversation.

**Works Cited**


—. Arab-Jewish Activism in Israel-Palestine. Farnham: Ashgate, 2012.


---

**About the Author**

Marcelo Svirsky is a Senior Lecturer of Politics and International Studies at the University of Wollongong. He focuses on Israel-Palestine by drawing on continental European philosophy, particularly on Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, Giorgio Agamben and Michel
Foucault. He has published articles in Cultural Politics, Subjectivity, Intercultural Education, Deleuze Studies, among others, and various books and edited collections: Deleuze and Political Activism (EUP, 2010); Arab-Jewish Activism in Israel-Palestine (Ashgate, 2012); Agamben and Colonialism with Simone Bignall (EUP, 2012); After Israel: Towards Cultural Transformation (Zed Books, 2014), and he recently edited a special issue of the Australian journal Settler Colonial Studies.

[Received 18 January 2015; accepted 29 April 2015]