

APARTHEID / apartheid / []

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Blankes/Nie Blankes. Jewish/non-Jewish. There are contemporary Israeli laws equivalent to all the major aspects of South African Apartheid legislation, and these are enforced with extreme violence. The most insidious difference between the two systems of discrimination, asserts Saree Makdisi, is that Israel and its many influential supporters deny that such unequal separate development is in any way racist, an assertion premised on the repudiation of the existence – let alone the rights – of 11 million Palestinians. How is this possible: this total refusal to entertain the facts and the evidence, reason, law and basic principles?

Among the highlights of my recent trip to South Africa were a tour of the Apartheid Museum in Johannesburg and a visit to the downtown neighborhood of Fordsburg with my close friends Hanif and Salim Vally (who grew up there during the Apartheid years – an experience that committed them both to the cause of justice), as well as a walk through the nearby half-demolished neighborhood of Fietas.

Like Sophiatown in Johannesburg and District Six in Cape Town, Fietas was largely cleared of its non-white population in the 1970s (some of its former residents were forcibly relocated to Lenasia, others to Eldorado Park) and then methodically demolished. Its eerie, grass-grown, open spaces today



Double Standard

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stand as stark reminders of the city's violent past; as reminders that under certain circumstances town planning, charting and zoning are immediately violent activities: for all its apparent innocuousness, bureaucracy can be as destructive as any bomb. What happened in Fietas certainly testifies to that: rather than adjusting planning to lived reality, real-

ity was forced into adjustment with planning, whole families were forced to move and a neighborhood was smashed to pieces.

The violence of bureaucracy and of racist logic is of course one of the central themes of the Apartheid Museum. Of all the exhibits, the one that I found most striking was probably one of the most visually



Hate speech

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innocuous: a list, adorning one wall, of the various laws and regulations that constituted South Africa's system of Apartheid. That wall, and some of the other exhibits, really brought home to me the extent to which South African Apartheid continually registered itself in the verbal and visual field through

endless plaques, signs, words, laws, names, classifications – an endless series of binaries constructed around the ultimate “Blankes / Nie Blankes.” One of the most compelling facts about South African Apartheid is that it was not just an invisible or inscrutable or anonymous logic: it dared to have a proper name,

after all; it insisted on calling attention to itself in its system of explicit signs, labels, markers – on every bus, at the entrance to every bathroom.

There was, of course, no way for me to contemplate South African Apartheid without contemplating its relevance for understanding the situation in Israel/Palestine today. For anyone who has been to Palestine, the grass-grown wasteland of Fietas looks familiar for good reason: it has its counterpart in every grass-covered ruin of every one of the hundreds of towns and villages in Palestine whose people were driven from their homes in 1948 because a racial logic dictated that they should not live in a space supposedly decreed (by God and/or the United Nations) to another people; in every wind-swept wasteland of Gaza where many of those same refugees' homes were once again bulldozed by the Israeli army to clear lines of sight and make room for free-fire zones; and in every corner of occupied East Jerusalem where Israeli bulldozers have deliberately and methodically demolished Palestinian family homes in a vain attempt to maintain the ideal ratio of Jews to non-Jews in the city's population (72 to 28, if you are interested in the details) that was determined by city planners in the 1970s – and has been sustained ever since by denying Palestinian residents of the city permits to build, bulldozing their homes when they build anyway, and stripping them of their residency status and expelling them from the city whenever possible. Two thousand, one hundred and sixty-two Palestinian Jerusalemites have suffered this fate since 2003 alone: expelled to the West Bank suburbs and denied the right to return to the city of their birth, while Jewish arrivals from Chisinau, London, Melbourne and Brooklyn who have never set eyes on Jerusalem take their



Abbey Road, Israeli version
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place.

It has become commonplace to casually use the language of apartheid to refer to the forms of discrimination that Israel maintains in the occupied territories: two different transportation networks, two different housing systems, two different educational complexes, even two different legal and administrative systems for the two populations, Jewish and non-Jewish.

Exactly the same discriminatory logic is at work across the 1949-1967 armistice line inside Israel itself, however. And for all the resistance that applying the term to the occupied territories still generates in certain quarters, it is even more difficult to stage a rational conversation about the system of apartheid at work inside pre-1967 Israel. Most of Israel's supporters in Europe, America, Australia and South Africa, and even some of its liberal critics –

the ones who accept that the system of separation that Israel has imposed on the occupied territories may have crossed a certain line – adamantly refuse to countenance the possibility that there is any systematic form of racism in the would-be Jewish state: for them, the 1975 UN General Assembly Resolution denouncing Zionism as a form of racism – the only UN Resolution to have been subsequently annulled – was itself a form of racism.

When it is leveled at Israel, then, the charge of apartheid generates not counter-argument backed by counter-evidence, but rather walls of sheer stony denial, if not inarticulate eruptions of blind rage. It is a stunning fact that, to this day, mainstream politicians, journalists and many ordinary citizens in the US and elsewhere, even South Africa itself – I witnessed this myself while delivering my February 2010 lecture at Wits – refuse to engage in argument, evidence, facts, on this issue. “The Jewish people know what it means to be oppressed, discriminated against, and even condemned to death because of their religion,” said Nancy Pelosi, the Speaker of the US House of Representatives, in an attempt to contest the primary assertion of President Carter’s 2006 book *Palestine: Peace not Apartheid* (which even explicitly exempted Israel within its pre-1967 borders from its analysis, restricting itself to the occupied territories). “They have been leaders in the fight for human rights in the United States and throughout the world,” continued Pelosi. “It is wrong to suggest that the Jewish people would support a government in Israel or anywhere else that institutionalizes ethnically based oppression, and Democrats reject that allegation vigorously.”

Such a refusal to enter into a rational argument, and to fall back on the equivalent of superstition

is not restricted to the US. “If you’re going to label Israel as Apartheid, then you are also ... attacking Canadian values,” said Canadian MP Peter Shurman in a recent angry denunciation of Canadian universities’ annual Israeli Apartheid Week, which was condemned by the parliament in Ottawa. “The use of the phrase ‘Israeli Apartheid Week’ is about as close to hate speech as one can get without being arrested, and I’m not certain it doesn’t actually cross over that line,” Shurman said.

Nor are such forms of denial restricted to politicians. Here, for example, is the *Washington Post* columnist Richard Cohen: “The Israel of today and the South Africa of yesterday have almost nothing in common. In South Africa, the minority white population harshly ruled the majority black population. Nonwhites were denied civil rights, and in 1958, they were even deprived of citizenship. In contrast, Israeli Arabs, about one-fifth of the country, have the same civil and political rights as do Israeli Jews. Arabs sit in the Knesset and serve in the military, although most are exempt from the draft. Whatever this is – and it looks suspiciously like a liberal democracy – it cannot be apartheid.”

I have known for some time, of course, that, no matter how many times columnists like Cohen repeat the statement that “Israeli Arabs,” that is, Palestinian citizens of Israel, have the same civil and political rights as do Israeli Jews, that simply is not the case: blind recitation may be comforting, but it doesn’t actually transform reality. What I learned from my trip to South Africa, however, is that the parallel between the two situations (South Africa on the one hand and the occupied territories *and* Israel on the other) is much more extensive than is normally admitted in public discourse, though there are

also some notable differences.

One thing I learned on my trip is that every single major South African Apartheid law that I saw on the wall of the Johannesburg museum has a direct equivalent in Israel today.

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The Population Registration Act of 1950, which assigned to every South African a racial identity according to which he or she had access to (or was denied) a varying range of rights, has a direct equivalent in the Israeli laws that assign to every citizen of the state a distinct national identity, on the basis of which various rights are also accessed (or denied). According to Israeli law, there is no such thing as Israeli nationality: as the High Court put it in the 1970s, “there is no Israeli nation separate from the Jewish people”. So Jewish citizens of the state are classified as having “Jewish nationality”, but non-Jews, although they can be citizens of the state, are explicitly not members of the “nation”, that is, Jews all over the world, whether they want to be affiliated with Israel or not, whose state Israel claims to be. As a result, the national identity of the Palestinian citizens of Israel – who constitute 20 percent of the *actual* rather than merely the *ideological* population of the state – is denied and erased at every institutional level. Unlike Jewish citizens, who are recognized as having a national identity, Israeli law methodically strips Palestinian citizens of their national identity and reduces them to mere ethnicity, which is why the state invented the term “Israeli Arabs” to refer to them. (That term is never used to refer to the Arab Jews who make up a considerable proportion of Israel’s Jewish population – the real



Poster for the Israeli Apartheid Week 2009
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Israeli Arabs – because of course in their case Israel wants to erase their Arab identity and absorb them as Jews. Whereas in the case of Palestinian citizens the reverse holds true: they can't be absorbed as Jews, so their indigestible Arabness is emphasized).

Of course, this linguistic evasion serves a purpose: it is what enables otherwise rational people like Richard Cohen or the editors of major newspapers to use Israel's own discourse to buy into the state's erasure of Palestinian identity in total unawareness that that is exactly what they are doing, and to come out at the other end miraculously saying that the state treats all its citizens equally: the act of discrimination is invisible because it is inscrutable. How, after all, can you acknowledge that Israel discriminates against its Palestinian population when there is no such thing? *What* Palestinians? There are no Palestinians inside Israel, only "Israeli Arabs". But that's the point: the denial, the erasure, the act of discrimination, is already there before the utterance is made: there is no language for it; it cannot be spoken.

[How ... can you acknowledge that Israel discriminates against its Palestinian population when there is no such thing?](#)

Indeed, this above all is what so markedly distinguishes Israeli apartheid from South African Apartheid: whereas the latter insisted on giving itself a name and drawing attention to itself through endless verbal and visual cues, the former seeks to elide and cover over the forms of racism that it embodies just as fully. Those who support racism in Israel can do so in total freedom from having to reckon with the fact that that is what they are doing. It is the ul-

time example of what David Theo Goldberg has recently theorized as "racism without racism". This is, in short, one of the most brilliant uses of interpellated denial and erasure that has ever been put into practice in the world. Although, like so many things in Israel (for example, building Independence Park on a Palestinian cemetery in Jerusalem, or inventing the legal category of the "present absentees" to refer to Palestinians who were driven from their homes in 1948 but remained within the borders of the state, or landscaping the West Bank wall from the Israeli side so its true scale is obscured and diminished), it is a purely unintended brilliance, and hence not really brilliance at all, but rather yet one more instance of the mind-boggling forms of denial at which Israel and its admirers are so proficient; indeed, on which the liberal Western admiration of Israel depends for its very existence.

At the end of the day, the South African white, irrespective of her ideological position, had to look at the sign saying "Blankes / Nie Blankes" and affiliate herself accordingly: an awkwardness the Apartheid Museum in Johannesburg reenacts very effectively at its entrance. The Jewish Israeli, and the supporter of Israel overseas, is never forced into that confrontation, never has to make that choice – it's done for him *before* language: the racism is predigested and rendered inscrutable. Jewish Israelis and admirers of the state can say that Israel treats all its citizens equally not so much because they do not realize that discrimination operates at the level of nationality rather than at the secondary level of citizenship, but rather because, unlike white South Africans, they are spared from *having* to reckon with that realization. They are allowed, and they allow themselves, to see right through it, to indulge in the misrecognition

of a reality that is actually staring them in the face, to continuously misrecognize the facts when someone else insists on tabulating, documenting and presenting them – if not to erupt in blind resentful fury when the facts are pushed at them too insistently.

Stripping Palestinian citizens of their national identity is not only merely degrading, however. In Israel, various fundamental rights – access to land and housing, for example – are attendant upon national identity, not the lesser category of mere citizenship. Thus, Jews who are not citizens actually have more rights than citizens who are not Jewish; in no other country on earth do racially privileged non-citizens enjoy greater rights than citizens and residents.

[Jews who are not citizens actually have more rights than citizens who are not Jewish.](#)

Hence, the Group Areas Act of 1950, which assigned different areas of South Africa for the residential use of different racial groups, has a direct equivalent in the system of regulations that determine access to land inside Israel (and inside the occupied territories too, of course, but here I am talking about Israel within its pre-1967 borders). Palestinian citizens of the state are excluded from residing in officially designated "Jewish community settlements" or "Jewish rural settlements" organized into rural councils that control the vast majority of the land in Israel. Indeed, they are barred from living on land held by "national institutions" such as the Jewish National Fund (JNF), almost all of it Palestinian property violently expropriated by the new state after the ethnic cleansing of Palestine in 1948. Nowhere, in fact, is the extent and institutionalization of this kind of

discrimination more glaringly obvious than in the pronouncements of the JNF, which advertises itself as “the caretaker of the land of Israel on behalf of its owners – Jewish people everywhere”. This institution not only acknowledges but proudly justifies its long-established record of discriminating against Palestinian citizens by pointing out that it “is not a public body which acts on behalf of all the citizens of the state. Its loyalty is to the Jewish people and its responsibility is to it [that is, the Jewish people] alone. As the owner of JNF land, the JNF does not have to act with equality towards all citizens of the state.” Moreover, it points out, “Israel’s Knesset [that is, parliament] and Israeli society have expressed their view that the distinction between Jews and non-Jews that is the basis for the Zionist vision is a distinction that is permitted,” and, indeed, that its allocation of land to Jews alone “is in complete accord with the founding principles of the state of Israel as a Jewish state and that the value of equality, even if it applies to JNF lands, would retreat before this principle.”

As a result of all the forms of discrimination with which they must contend as non-Jews living in the would-be-Jewish state (would-be in spite of the continuing non-Jewish, Palestinian presence), some 10 percent of the Palestinian citizens of Israel live today in “unrecognized villages” which predate the existence of the state by decades or centuries yet do not appear on any official maps. They are therefore not connected to the national power grid, the national water distribution system, the phone network, the mail system: they do not officially exist – other than the fact that all the homes in these villages are slated for demolition because they exist on land that the state retroactively zoned as agricultural, there being

“no residences” there, after all. Here again the same logic of profound denial of denial is at work: how can you deny the circumstances of life in villages that according to the state do not officially exist in the first place? There is literally *nothing to deny!*

The Bantu Education Act of 1953, which created a separate and unequal educational system for black South Africans, has a direct equivalent in the administrative procedures that have created separate and unequal educational systems for Jewish and non-Jewish citizens of the state of Israel (and again the same thing goes for the occupied territories too). The bare statistics say it all: the state provides 1,600 subsidized day-care centers, for example, but only 25 of those are in Palestinian towns. Only 4,200 of the 80,000 Israeli children under four years old who attend day care are Palestinian, though had that number been in proportion to the actual population, it would have been over 20,000. After day care, Israel invests more than three times as much on a per capita basis in a Jewish student than it does in a non-Jewish (that is, Palestinian) one. The state’s current list of the 553 towns and villages granted top priority for education excludes all Palestinian towns inside Israel other than four villages. There are 25 special art schools for Jewish children, and none for Palestinian children – citizens of the state all. And at the higher levels of its school system, Israel opens far more curricular tracks to Jewish students than to Palestinian ones. As a result of all these forms of discrimination, and nakedly discriminatory entrance and matriculation procedures – and despite the fact that Palestinians traditionally place great emphasis on their children’s education, a fact attested to by the disproportionately large numbers of Palestinians among the Arab intelligentsia – a far greater

proportion of Jewish students make it through high school, get accepted to university, and graduate. Only 10 percent of Israel’s university students are Palestinian, for example, though proportionately speaking it ought to be double that number. Only 3 percent of its Ph.D. students are Palestinian. Only 1 percent of its university lecturers are Palestinian.

And the list goes on. South Africa’s Prohibition of Mixed Marriages Act of 1949 has its equivalent in the Israeli laws prohibiting Jews from marrying non-Jews (again, there is no proscription in language that announces this prohibition as such, but there is no institution of civil marriage in Israel, so Jews are only allowed to marry other Jews, and then only according to Orthodox religious law); the Natives (Urban Areas) Consolidation Act of 1945 and the Black (Native) Amendment Act of 1952 that required black South Africans to carry passes and regulated their access to urban areas have equivalents in the various Israeli laws regulating and controlling the movement of Palestinians – but not Jews – within the occupied territories and between and among the occupied territories, Jerusalem and Israel; the Public Safety Act of 1953 has an equivalent in the Israeli military regulations permitting the long-term detention without trial of Palestinians (but not Jews, who are protected by Israeli civil law) in the occupied territories – a cumulative total of 650,000 Palestinians have been held prisoner by Israel since 1967, about 20 percent of the entire population; the Promotion of Bantu Self-Government Act of 1952 and the Bantu Homelands Constitution Act of 1971 have an equivalent in the Oslo Accords’ creation of a so-called Palestinian Authority to manage the affairs of Palestinian (but not Jewish) residents of the occupied territories.



Mandela on Israeli apartheid
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Indeed, just as South Africa created Transkei, Ciskei and Bophuthatswana in order to artificially delete as many blacks as possible from South Africa's own population registry, Israel maintains pockets of the West Bank and all of Gaza as holding pens for the land's non-Jewish population, while settling the rest of the territory with its own population in order to be able to have its cake and eat it too: to absorb the land (settling it) but not the people, and hence to maintain the claim that it is a Jewish state while

keeping to a bare minimum the number of non-Jews who officially live within the state – and hence to perpetuate the fiction that it does not disenfranchise the majority of the land's population that is Palestinian. *Of course* Israel disenfranchises the land's Palestinian majority: there are today 11 million Palestinians and 5 million Israeli Jews. Israel's manipulation of populations and territories, however, obscures as much as possible these material circumstances: 1 million Palestinians are citizens of Israel

and linguistically disappeared into the category of "Israeli Arabs," so they don't count; 6 million Palestinians continue to live in the exile that was violently forced on them in 1948 by Israel, which continues to deny their legal and moral right of return; and so *they* don't count. That leaves only the 4 million or so Palestinians in the occupied territories – and they have the blessings of an illusory autonomy (or at least the talk about one day having autonomy) and the collaborationist Palestinian Authority and its hopelessly compromised and politically bankrupt leadership. At face value, the situation may not look like a minority oppressing a majority, but that is exactly what is going on.

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The fact that Israel has held – while stubbornly refusing to resolve the status of – the occupied territories for over four decades, or two thirds of its own existence as a state, belies the discursive provisionality of the territories' status. Israel has colonized, planted, partially developed the West Bank and East Jerusalem; it has settled half a million of its own citizens there; it has extended its own laws there; it uses the aquifers and airspace there every single day. In practice, Israel has annexed the West Bank; only in name has it not done so. And the only reason it has not done so is because only the pretense that the West Bank (like Gaza) is somehow exterior to the state allows Israel to maintain a fiction at the level of language that is belied by the material reality. This allows, for example, Richard Cohen to come along and say, well, yes, there *may* be discrimination in the West Bank, "but it is not part of Israel proper,"



Apartheid: then and now
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so it doesn't really count – and anyway that territory will eventually be the “heartland” of a Palestinian state (something that has been talked about for almost two decades, half as long as the West Bank has

actually been occupied, without it making the slightest bit of difference on the ground: for example, the colonist population has essentially tripled since the first so-called peace talks in 1991).

There are, of course, major differences between apartheid inside Israel and Apartheid in South Africa.

I have already pointed out one of the major differences: the legibility of South African Apartheid and the relative illegibility – inscrutability – of Israeli apartheid. Nowhere in Israel or the occupied territories is there a sign that baldly says “Jews Only.” The racism is practiced *in practice* rather than in language. That's what enables supporters of Israel to engage in the endless equivocation and hair-splitting to which they are so often reduced in defending a form of racism that denies that that is what it is. For example, to the charge that there are two different road networks in the West Bank, one for Jews (connecting colonies to each other and to Israel) and one for non-Jews, the retort (one that is routinely deployed by Israeli *hasbara* and propaganda outfits in the US and Europe, such as CAMERA, whose capacity for linguistic contortionism is so extreme that it is almost comical) is invariably to insist that one network is reserved for all Israeli citizens, not just Jewish ones. In the most narrowly literal sense – at the level of language that has ceased to function as language because it no longer conveys meaning, because it is not meant to – that's true. On the other hand, only Jews live in the West Bank colonies (Palestinians, whether they are citizens of Israel or not, aren't allowed to live there because they are not Jewish), so in *practice* if not in *name* one road network is set apart for Jews.

Again, as with so many other things, what's in play here is a form of denial that can't bring itself to acknowledge itself for what it is. It is by staring so obsessively at language, not seeing the absent meanings because they are not conveyed in language

– “where does it say ‘Jews only?’” – that supporters of Israel allow themselves to avoid recognizing the material reality: there does not have to be a sign saying “Jews only” in *language* in order for Jews only to use the road in *practice*. Unlike Apartheid in South Africa, what we see in Israel is racism that avoids language; racism without a proper name, or, in Goldberg’s formulation, racism without racism. That doesn’t make it any less racist, however.

Another difference: the system of Apartheid inside South Africa, for all its violence and viciousness, was not quite as relentless as the system that obtains inside Israel and the occupied territories. The movement of blacks in South Africa was controlled, not banned altogether, as is the case, for example, with the movement of Palestinians in and out of Gaza, which Israel has sealed off from the world for over five years now. The South African government dispatched Caspar armored cars and soldiers with rifles into Soweto – not heavy tanks, Apache helicopters firing Hellfire missiles and F-16s dropping one-ton bombs on people. For all its horror, the Sharpeville Massacre would – though this is of course not to diminish it or the human suffering that it represents – hardly stand out in a list of Israeli massacres of Palestinians extending from Deir Yassin and Tantra in the 1940s to Kufr Qassem, Rafah, and Khan Yunis in the 1950s to Sabra and Shatilia in the 1980s to Nablus and Jenin in the 2000s to Gaza in 2008-9. There is nothing like a precedent for Israel’s 2008-9 assault on Gaza in the entire history of Apartheid in South Africa: the murder of one out of every thousand people; the destruction of tens of thousands of homes at one go; the cutting off of vital supplies of food, medicine, fuel and construction materials to a population composed – as Gaza’s is – largely of

children, condemning them to malnourishment; the gloating in print, for all the world to see (though not for it to make a difference), as the Israeli Harvard fellow Martin Kramer did recently, that the reduction of population by siege and malnourishment will also reduce the number of “redundant young men,” and hence reduce the threat that Gaza poses to Israel.

Veterans from the anti-Apartheid struggle in South Africa who visit Israel and the occupied territories consistently say the same thing. “It is worse, worse, worse than everything we endured,” noted Mondli Makhanya, editor-in-chief of the *Sunday Times* of South Africa, after a recent visit to Palestine. “The level of the apartheid, the racism and the brutality are worse than the worst period of apartheid. The apartheid regime viewed the blacks as inferior; I do not think the Israelis see the Palestinians as human beings at all.”

And *that* of course is the major substantive difference between South African Apartheid and Israeli apartheid. There is a world of difference between inferiority and dehumanization: it is the difference between exploitation and annihilation. As the Apartheid Museum in Johannesburg makes very clear, in South Africa the system was designed to enable the exploitation of black labor, to use black people’s labor power to work in houses, offices and gold mines, but deny them equal rights: for the white elite to have its cake and eat it too. The Israeli system is not about exploitation of Palestinian labor: labor from the occupied territories is now totally irrelevant to the Israeli economy, having been made up for by recent immigrants from the former Soviet Union and the supply of cheap workers from southeast Asia enabled by global circuits of exchange. It is, as it has al-

ways been, about the removal of one population and its replacement by another, a process that began but did not end in 1948, and that continues to this day every time a Palestinian home is demolished in Jerusalem; every time a Palestinian family is expelled from the ghost town that is central Hebron; every time a Palestinian Jerusalemite is stripped of her residency papers and expelled from the city of her birth; every time a Palestinian family is shattered and broken because of an Israeli law that was instituted in 2003 that prevents a Palestinian in Israel or Jerusalem from marrying and living with a spouse from the occupied territories, even though of course a Jewish Israeli can marry a Jewish colonist from the West Bank and they can live together wherever they please. When a similar law was proposed at the peak of Apartheid in South Africa in 1980, it was summarily dismissed by that country’s high court as an unacceptable violation of black people’s right to family. Israel’s high court upheld that country’s new law in 2006.

In a word, as I have put this in other contexts: south African Apartheid was biopolitical in nature – concerned with the management and administration of living black labor; Israel’s is, to borrow the phrase that Achille Mbembe has elaborated so effectively, necropolitical – concerned with the destruction and erasure of Palestinians: something that every Palestinian resists every single day, if only by the act of stubbornly continuing to exist.

This necropolitics depends crucially and absolutely, however, on the system of inscrutability and invisibility that allows Israelis and the supporters of Israel to go on practicing and endorsing a vulgar and violent form of racism without having to reckon with and acknowledge the fact that that is precisely

what they are doing. I have argued in other contexts – most recently in my *Critical Inquiry* article about the construction of a so-called Museum of Tolerance (really a kind of shrine to Zionism) right on top of the ruins of the most important Muslim cemetery in Jerusalem – that there are two main forms of Zionism in practice today: a hardcore Zionism which we see at work in, for example, the pronouncements of Avigdor Lieberman, Israel’s current Foreign Minister, who has made an open call for the expulsion of Israel’s Palestinian citizens the platform for his recent meteoric rise in Israeli politics, which involves a kind of brutal honesty; and a softcore Zionism – the dominant one still – whose adherents are, by virtue of the linguistic and historical and emotional short-circuits I have described here, spared from having to reckon with and honestly acknowledge that what they support is a racist enterprise; it is only on the basis of that very inscrutability, in fact, that they can go on supporting it. This is the kind of Zionist position that says for example, in all innocence, that it is anti-semitic to criticize Zionism because it only represents the Jewish people’s right to have a national homeland like every other people.

[a softcore Zionism ... whose adherents are ... spared from having to reckon with and honestly acknowledge that what they support is a racist enterprise](#)

In asking so insistently why Jews should be denied the same right that every other people have, the softcore Zionist depends on the emotional short-circuit I have discussed here to mis-recognize the very question she is asking: for the flip-side of the same question is not whether Jews have a right to a homeland

– it’s whether that right cancels out the Palestinian people’s own right to a homeland (and the answer to *that* question is “no”). Only by concentrating so obsessively and self-absorbedly on the recto of the question does the softcore Zionist avoid having to deal with its verso and with the indelible fact that there is not, there never was, and there never will be, a way to create a Jewish state in Palestine without denying or negating the Palestinian claim to the same land and the historical rights attendant on that claim. Rather than making the denial of Palestinian rights an explicit component of her ideological position – as the hardcore Zionist does – the softcore Zionist removes that denial from her field of vision, in effect denying that there is anything to deny to begin with. And as I said earlier the strength of Israel’s system of apartheid is that it is structured in such a way that it never ever makes the great mistake of South African Apartheid by forcing people to confront the nakedness and vulgarity of its racism. So they can support it and go on thinking of themselves as virtuous, ethical and progressive, technologically chic, friendly to animals and kind to the environment.

Where does this leave Palestinians and those who advocate their rights?

There are, I think, two immediate conclusions from this discussion. One point is this: the reason negotiations between Palestinians and Israelis so often seem so futile is that the whole point of the linguistic short-circuits and forms of denial of denial that I have been discussing here is to forestall negotiation, or at least to bypass and render unapproachable the core of the conflict between Zionism and the Palestinians. The great strength of a racism that exists outside of language – that exempts itself from language – is that it is also quite impervious to lan-

guage: every attempt to point to it and say “that’s the problem” will be met with the perfectly sincere reply “what problem?” What racism? What villages? What road network? What Palestinians? This is a structural complex for which there is no resolution at the level of language and hence diplomatic negotiation (let alone negotiation between two totally unequal parties). Hence the manifest futility of the attempts to end this conflict by raising consciousness among Israelis or supporters of Israel around the world, or appealing to their better instincts: the sheer stubborn refusal to acknowledge reality is demonstrated every single time lectures on Palestinian rights around the world are met with that wearily familiar wall of solid denials and that total refusal to entertain facts, evidence, reason, laws, principles – if not actually eruptions of inarticulate fury – to which we have all grown so accustomed.

The second point is that it should be even more obvious than ever that, in view of the system of apartheid in place in Israel and the occupied territories – a system of apartheid that is inseparable from the project to create and maintain the pretense of a monocultural state in what is fact a profoundly heterogeneous land – there can be no peaceful and just resolution of the Zionist conflict with the Palestinians until the attempt to replace one people with another, to impose a monocultural identity on a multicultural country, is abandoned and its institutions completely dismantled. Creating a Palestinian statelet in the West Bank alongside an Israel whose claim to Jewishness would be reinforced in a two-state solution would do little for West Bankers, less for Gazans, nothing for the refugees and their descendants, and less than nothing for the Palestinian citizens of Israel, whose status as reviled non-Jews

would become even worse. Only the creation of a democratic and secular state in all of historic Palestine, in which Israeli Jews and Palestinians – all of them, the ones now under occupation, the ones living as second-class citizens of Israel, and the refugees of 1948 and their descendants, whose right of return is absolutely beyond question – can live as equal citizens can resolve this conflict once and for all.

privileged groups don't abandon their privileges
just because that's the right thing to do

From these two conclusions a third follows as well. A just peace will not come about by merely pleading with, or trying to persuade, Israeli Jews to do the right thing and abandon and dismantle the racist system that endows them with privileges while denying Palestinians fundamental rights. All the closest historical precedents to this conflict – above all South Africa – remind us that privileged groups don't abandon their privileges just because that's the right thing to do or because they are made to feel bad about enjoying those privileges; they abandon them only when they have no other choice. This case is no different: a just peace fundamentally requires nonviolent outside pressure to be brought to bear on Israel; which is why for so many people of good will around the world, and for so many Palestinians themselves, the growing BDS (boycott / divestment / sanctions) movement is a source of such hope.