

The necessity of cultural boycott

Ilan Pappé, *The Electronic Intifada*, 23 June 2009

If there is anything new in the never-ending sad story of Palestine it is the clear shift in public opinion in the UK. I remember coming to these isles in 1980 when supporting the Palestinian cause was confined to the left and in it to a very particular section and ideological stream. The post-Holocaust trauma and guilt complex, military and economic interests and the charade of Israel as the only democracy in the Middle East all played a role in providing immunity for the State of Israel. Very few were moved, so it seems, by a state that had dispossessed half of Palestine's native population, demolished half of their villages and towns, discriminated against the minority among them who lived within its borders through an apartheid system and divided into enclaves two million and a half of them in a harsh and oppressive military occupation.

Almost 30 years later it seems that all these filters and cataracts have been removed. The magnitude of the ethnic cleansing of 1948 is well known, the suffering of the people in the occupied territories recorded and described even by the US president as unbearable and inhuman. In a similar way, the destruction and depopulation of the greater Jerusalem area is noted daily and the racist nature of the policies towards the Palestinians in Israel are frequently rebuked and condemned.

The reality today in 2009 is described by the UN as "a human catastrophe." The conscious and conscientious sections of British society know very well who caused and who produced this catastrophe. This is not related any more to elusive circumstances, or to the "conflict" -- it is seen clearly as the outcome of Israeli policies throughout the years. When Archbishop Desmond Tutu was asked for his reaction to what he saw in the occupied territories, he noted sadly that it was worse than apartheid. He should know.

As in the case of South Africa, these decent people, either as individuals or as members of organizations, voice their outrage against the continued oppression, colonization, ethnic cleansing and starvation in Palestine. They are looking for ways of showing their protest and some even hope convince their government to change its old policy of indifference and inaction in the face of the continued destruction of Palestine and the Palestinians. Many among them are Jews, as these atrocities are done in their name according to the logic of the Zionist ideology, and quite a few among them are veterans of previous civil struggles in this country for similar causes all over the world. They are not confined any more to one political party and they come from all walks of life.

So far the British government is not moved. It was also passive when the anti-apartheid movement in this country demanded of it to impose sanctions on South Africa. It took several decades for that activism from below to reach the political top. It takes longer in the case of Palestine: guilt about the Holocaust, distorted historical narratives and contemporary misrepresentation of Israel as a democracy seeking peace and the Palestinians as eternal Islamic terrorists blocked the flow of the popular impulse. But it is beginning to find its way and presence, despite the continued accusation of any such demand as being anti-Semitic and the demonization of Islam and Arabs. The third sector, that important link between civilians and government agencies, has shown us the way. One trade union after the other, one professional group after the other, have all sent recently a clear message: enough is enough. It is done in the name of decency, human morality and basic civil commitment not to remain idle in the face of atrocities of the kind Israel has and still is committing against the Palestinian people.

In the last eight years the Israeli criminal policy escalated, and the Palestinian activists were seeking new means to confront it. They have tried it all, armed struggle, guerrilla warfare, terrorism and diplomacy: nothing worked. And yet they are not giving up and now they are proposing a nonviolent strategy -- that of

boycott, sanctions and divestment. With these means they wish to persuade Western governments to save not only them, but ironically also the Jews in Israel from an imminent catastrophe and bloodshed. This strategy bred the call for cultural boycott of Israel. This demand is voiced by every part of the Palestinian existence: by the civil society under occupation and by Palestinians in Israel. It is supported by the Palestinian refugees and is led by members of the Palestinian exile communities. It came in the right moment and gave individuals and organizations in the UK a way to express their disgust at the Israeli policies and at the same time an avenue for participating in the overall pressure on the government to change its policy of providing immunity for the impunity on the ground.

It is bewildering that this shift of public opinion has had no impact so far on policy; but again we are reminded of the tortuous way the campaign against apartheid had to go before it became a policy. It is also worth remembering that two brave women in Dublin, toiling on the cashiers in a local supermarket, were the ones who began a huge movement of change by refusing to sell South African goods. Twenty-nine years later, Britain joined others in imposing sanctions on apartheid. So while governments hesitate for cynical reasons, out of fear of being accused of anti-Semitism or maybe due to Islamophobic inhibitions, citizens and activists do their utmost, symbolically and physically, to inform, protest and demand. They have a more organized campaign, that of the cultural boycott, or they can join their unions in the coordinated policy of pressure. They can also use their name or fame for indicating to us all, that decent people in this world cannot support what Israel does and what it stands for. They do not know whether their action will make an immediate change or they would be so lucky as to see change in their lifetime. But in their own personal book of who they are and what they did in life and in the harsh eye of historical assessment they would be counted in with all those who did not remain indifferent when inhumanity raged under the guise of democracy in their own countries or elsewhere.

On the other hand, citizens in this country, especially famous ones, who continue to broadcast, quite often out of ignorance or out of more sinister reasons, the fable of Israel as a cultured Western society or as the "only democracy in the Middle East" are not only wrong factually. They provide immunity for one of the greatest atrocities in our time. Some of them demand we should leave culture out of our political actions. This approach to Israeli culture and academia as separate entities from the army, the occupation and the destruction is morally corrupt and logically defunct. Eventually, one day the outrage from below, including in Israel itself, will produce a new policy -- the present US administration is already showing early signs of it. History did not look kindly at those filmmakers who collaborated with US Senator Joseph McCarthy in the 1950s or endorsed apartheid. It would adopt a similar attitude to those who are silent about Palestine now.

A good case in point unfolded last month in Edinburgh. Filmmaker Ken Loach led a campaign against the official and financial connections the city's film festival had with the Israeli embassy. Such a stance was meant to send a message that this embassy represents not only the filmmakers of Israel but also its generals who massacred the people of Gaza, its tormentors who torture Palestinians in jails, its judges who sent 10,000 Palestinians -- half of them children -- without trial to prison, its racist mayors who want to expel Arabs from their cities, its architects who built walls and fences to enclave people and prevent them from reaching their fields, schools, cinemas and offices and its politicians who strategize yet again how to complete the ethnic cleansing of Palestine they began in 1948. Ken Loach felt that only a call for boycotting the festival as whole would bring its directors into a moral sense and perspective. He was right; it did, because the case is so clear-cut and the action so simple and pure.

It is not surprising that a counter voice was heard. This is an ongoing struggle and would not be won easily. As I write these words, we commemorate the 42nd year of the Israeli occupation -- the longest, and one of the cruelest in modern times. But time has also produced the lucidity needed for such decisions.

This is why Ken's action was immediately effective; next time even this would not be necessary. One of his critics tried to point to the fact that people in Israel like Ken's films, so this was a kind of ingratitude. I can assure this critic that those of us in Israel who watch Ken's movies are also those who salute him for his bravery and unlike this critic we do not think of this an act similar to a call for Israel's destruction, but rather the only way of saving Jews and Arabs living there. But it is difficult anyway to take such criticism seriously when it is accompanied by description of the Palestinians as a terrorist entity and Israel as a democracy like Britain. Most of us in the UK have moved far away from this propagandist silliness and are ready for change. We are now waiting for the government of these isles to follow suit.