

surveillance. More broadly, it means confronting how economic and state structures govern both African Americans and immigrants from the Global South.

In today's New Jim Crow, it is nonwhite immigrants whose social experience most closely mirrors that of African Americans under the old Jim Crow. Undocumented immigrants in particular often find themselves engaged in hard and exploitative labor, with no legal recourse, under the continuous threat of legally sanctioned terror. More than 400,000 people annually cycle through the immigrant prison system. Penal and employment structures interlock to enforce the invisibility and powerlessness of nonwhite communities working on the farm or in the factory under dependent conditions. Like African Americans, immigrants from the Global South, especially from Central and Latin America, can be thought of as shaped historically by the forces of European empire; they also share many of the same basic interests in fundamental social transformation. This link is crucial: connecting the immigrant and African American freedom struggles cuts against false assumptions that black communities are either alone or have more in common with those in economic and political power than they do with other marginalized groups. And it yet again provides a way to join calls to end the carceral state with calls for fundamental economic change.

Now is the time to reassert the full tradition of revolutionary reform: to argue, as Martin Luther King did fifty years ago, for "a radical restructuring of the architecture of American society." Such a restructuring requires that we break from fantasies about national redemption. But it also means extending arguments about racism into arguments about American political economy, and embracing the black radical tradition as well as the full scope of its ambitions.

Only then will the crisis of the creed offer a path to something fundamentally new. +

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### **The Logic of the Beneficiary**

THE PALESTINIAN CIVIL SOCIETY MOVEMENT for boycott, divestment, and sanctions (BDS) against Israel came into existence in July 2005, partly as a response to the International Court of Justice's ruling one year earlier on the illegality of Israel's wall. It called on "people of conscience" around the world to "launch broad boycotts, implement divestment initiatives, and to demand sanctions against Israel, until Palestinian rights are recognized in full compliance with international law." Unlike the two-state solution, which ignored both refugees not living in Gaza or the West Bank and Palestinian citizens of Israel, it neatly fitted the three planks of its platform to the three broad sections of the Palestinian people. For Palestinians on the West Bank, there was a call to end the occupation and dismantle the wall. For those who are currently second-class citizens of Israel, there was a call for full and equal rights. And for refugees living elsewhere, there was a call to respect their right "to return to their homes and properties as stipulated in UN Resolution 194."

In the ten years since this nonviolent initiative began, it has chalked up some notable victories. These include the 2013 BDS resolutions passed by the Asian American and American Studies Associations, followed by other academic organizations, as well as similar movements by churches and trade unions. Negative publicity has driven down the stock price of the Israeli company SodaStream and haunted companies like Ahava (manufactures in illegal settlement),

Hewlett-Packard (military IT) and Caterpillar (home demolitions). Shows have been canceled by Lauryn Hill, Coldplay, and Elvis Costello. There have been full endorsements of the boycott by Danny Glover and Roger Waters, among other entertainers.

BDS has also accumulated a good deal of controversy. The Palestinian Authority opposes it: eager to remind the world that it does recognize Israel, it supports the boycotting of products manufactured in the occupied territories but nothing aimed at Israel itself. In the US, a number of university presidents responded angrily to the ASA's resolution, proclaiming that all academic boycotts violate the core values of academic freedom and the free flow of ideas. South Carolina and Illinois legislators have passed bills engaging their states to blacklist companies that boycott Israel. The Trans-Pacific Partnership bill passed by Congress in June stipulated the rejection of anti-Israel boycotts as a core principle in any trade talks with the European Union. The AIPAC-supported effort to make BDS illegal may well succeed. Israel outlawed public support for BDS a couple of years ago.

The growing appeal of BDS relies on a growing sense that the founding claims of Zionism are less and less relevant to the facts on the ground. On the most fundamental recent issues, like the 2014 invasion of Gaza and the ongoing theft of West Bank land for settlements, Israel's conduct is increasingly held to be indefensible.

A core of defensiveness about this conduct persists, even among smart and principled people. It's worth asking where it comes from. You can't tell from the arguments and counterarguments. As many who have suffered through these debates will have noticed, the points raised are often unenlightening even if you agree with them. You would think the very idea that

the Israelis have been selling bottled water extracted from the Golan Heights while making it unlawful for Palestinians to drill wells on their own property would shake the most diehard Zionist. But this is rarely the level on which we form reasons and opinions. More often, such decisions come from somewhere deeper—a substratum of unarticulated, but not necessarily unprincipled, intuition. With new movements and venues for BDS popping up almost daily and receiving surprising amounts of mainstream attention, both positive and negative, the time seems ripe to delve into that dark substratum, and thereby try to understand the deeper logic that undergirds the BDS debate.

THAT DARK SUBSTRATUM becomes visible in Ari Shavit's much-acclaimed *My Promised Land: The Triumph and Tragedy of Israel* (2013). In a long section of the book, Shavit, an Israeli journalist for *Haaretz*, goes in search of the story behind one of the most harrowing episodes of the military conquest of Palestine: the Israeli army's massacre of Palestinians at Lydda, a once-thriving city between Tel Aviv and Jerusalem. As he recounts it, in July 1948 the army moved through the streets tossing grenades into houses and firing on Palestinian civilians. They came upon Palestinians taking sanctuary in a mosque and gunned them down. Others, many of them women and children, died on a forced march to Jordan after being "permitted" to leave with the possessions they could carry. Shavit speaks with the brigade commander and other soldiers in an attempt to reconstruct the story. He tries manfully to explain the atrocity on its own terms: there were misunderstandings, provocations, unfortunate improvisations by soldiers on the ground. But ultimately, he concludes, there was a deliberate strategy of expulsion.

He drives to Lydda, lingers in the demolished center of the old city, reflects on the ruins and impoverished dwellings. “Amid the ugly slums, the shabby market, and the cheap stores,” he writes, “it is clear that there is still an unhealed wound. Unlike other cities where Israel’s modernity has overwhelmed old Palestine, here Palestine still makes itself felt.” Confronting the tragedy, he confronts the founding idea of Israel itself:

Do I wash my hands of Zionism? Do I turn my back on the Jewish national movement that carried out the deed of Lydda? Like the brigade commander, I am faced with something too immense to deal with. Like the military commander, [Shmaryahu] Gutman, I see a reality I cannot contain. Like the training group leader, I am not only sad, I am horrified. For when one opens the black box, one understands that whereas the small mosque massacre could have been a misunderstanding brought about by a tragic chain of accidental events, the conquest of Lydda and the expulsion of Lydda were no accident. They were an inevitable phase of the Zionist revolution that laid the foundation for the Zionist state. Lydda is an integral and essential part of our story. And when I try to be honest about it, I see that the choice is stark: either reject Zionism because of Lydda, or accept Zionism along with Lydda.

One thing is clear to me: the brigade commander and the military governor were right to get angry at the bleeding heart Israeli liberals of later years who condemn what they did in Lydda but enjoy the fruits of their deed. . . . If need be, I’ll stand by the damned. Because I know that if it wasn’t for them, the State of Israel would not have been born. If it wasn’t for them, I would not have been born. They did the dirty, filthy work that enables my people, myself, my daughter, and my sons to live.

Shavit presents the historical spectacle as sublime—too immense for ordinary categories to contain. He himself deals with it only by admitting that, horrified as he is, deep down he wants the dirty work done. (In that sense he got what he wanted at Lydda, where participants in the slaughter included such national heroes-to-be as Moshe Dayan and Yitzhak Rabin.) Shavit can’t say no to what they did for him. “Our side is clear: we had to come into the Lydda Valley and we had to take the Lydda Valley,” he writes. “There is no other home for us, and there was no other way.” But he sees why the Palestinians who became homeless that day cannot forget Lydda either. He admits that the massacre and expulsion were policy, not accident. He says this truth is “essential” in the sense that it has to be confessed, but also in that it had to happen to create the state of Israel. And because it’s essential, it can’t be damned. He is the beneficiary of that “dirty, filthy” violence, enjoying “the fruits of their deed.” As a beneficiary, he would be a hypocrite if he damned that on which his existence depends.

Shavit’s honesty—his acknowledgment that the very founding of Israel was based on atrocity, if also in his eyes on tragic necessity—is at odds with most Zionist commentary, at least in the US. When it comes to the facts, for the most part he faces them. To be sure, there are evasions. If you compare Shavit’s account with that of, say, the more critical Israeli historian Ilan Pappé, you will note that Shavit does not give the number of the Palestinian dead, even as an estimate. He does not mention that Dr. George Habash, who went on to found the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine, was working that day as a physician in the local hospital. To mention what Habash saw during those hours at the operating table would have suggested good

reasons for the Palestinian violence that Shavit, like almost everyone else in Israel, wants to present as unreasoned and unreasonable. He doesn't underline how systematically Israeli soldiers looted jewelry and other valuables from the homes of refugees, as testified to by all observers, Israelis included. Images of uniformed Jewish thugs robbing and humiliating helpless civilians come too close for comfort to iconic scenes of Jewish deportees herded and hounded by the Nazis. Still, Shavit's telling is more vivid and, where individual acts of violence are concerned, even more accusatory than, for instance, that of Palestinian volunteer and paramedic Spiro Munayyer, whose firsthand account (published as a book in Beirut, with extracts translated in the *Journal of Palestine Studies* in 1998) emphasized the heroism of the city's vastly outnumbered Palestinian defenders.

When it comes to the moral case, there are obvious holes in Shavit's argument. Shavit refuses to damn an atrocity. By the same standard, any Palestinian could refuse to damn suicide bombers, and would have at least as good a case. How would Shavit like that? If you take his route, there's no way out; you choose the certainty of unending vendetta over the still not entirely hopeless project of peace-with-justice. A second response would be that past atrocities are not the point; the point is that the ethnic cleansing of Palestine continues. A few rockets that cause some much-documented Israeli anxiety but don't hit anything cannot be compared to the deliberate massacre of 2,000 people, most of them civilians, in Israel's latest (2014) foray into Gaza. What Shavit is really defending, without saying so, are ongoing, apparently limitless atrocities. Not just amorality in the past but amorality that goes on and on. To decide the moral case, that's perhaps all that needs to be said.

Shavit suggests that you can't question the premises on which your life depends; all you can do is say thank you and go on your way. In a way, he is speaking on behalf of moral consistency. I think that's why his account exerts emotional force, even if rational objections are not hard to come by. We may be inoculated against Shavit's conclusion—I hope we are—but there is more to contemplate in the logic that gets him there.

THE PROBLEM that Shavit touches on could be called that of the well-intended beneficiary: the person who knowingly profits from a system she believes to be unjust. One conclusion that seems to flow from this situation is that if you benefit from past atrocities, you must either "stand with" those who committed those atrocities or somehow renounce the benefits. But what if it turns out that the benefits are impossible to renounce? The clock cannot be turned back. If you did manage to walk away from the life you are leading, wouldn't the life with which you replaced it make you the beneficiary of similarly reprehensible facts and deeds? In the name of life itself, you find yourself after all denied any real choice. How much more elegant, then, to stop sticking other people's noses into those "essential" actions and demanding that they disavow what has made their lives possible. If Shavit's refusal to condemn past atrocities has, at least, the force of honesty, it's because we agree that we are all the beneficiaries of unspeakable acts—all of us without exception.

The logic of the beneficiary, though, can lead in the opposite direction. Take, for instance, the movement for economic redistribution at the global scale, something that no domestic constituency or domestic politics can be relied on to put at the top of its agenda. I borrowed the phrase "all of us without exception" above from

Jean-Paul Sartre's preface to Frantz Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth*:

You know well enough that we are exploiters. You know too that we have laid our hands on first the gold and the metals, then the petroleum of the "new continents," and that we have brought them back to the old countries. This was not without excellent results, as witness our palaces, our cathedrals, and our great industrial cities; and then when there was a threat of a slump, the colonial markets were there to soften the blow or to divert it. Crammed with riches, Europe accorded the human status de jure to its inhabitants. With us, to be a man is to be an accomplice of colonialism, since all of us without exception have profited by colonial exploitation.

Sartre's conclusion is more promising than Shavit's: Yes, he says, Europe was founded on atrocity. And the atrocities continue. That is precisely why we Europeans (they are his addressees) must do everything in our power to support anticolonial movements like Algeria's. Sartre, too, is speaking the language of the beneficiary: denouncing injustice while admitting that he and his readers have profited from it and grown out of its soil. Why, then, does this logic take him in so wildly different a direction? Maybe the answer lies in how presentist the logic is, or (to coin a phrase) how pastist.

Shavit's "I'll stand by the damned" makes it clear that for him, the moral responsibility that counts is moral responsibility to the past, which made his present life possible. But the same logic applies in the present—for example, when considering the political-economic link between my prosperity here and someone else's deprivation in a distant there. "Under the capitalist system," George Orwell wrote in 1936, "in order that England may live in comparative comfort,

a hundred million Indians must live on the verge of starvation—an evil state of affairs, but you acquiesce in it every time you step into a taxi or eat a plate of strawberries and cream." A quarter of a century before Sartre, Orwell was already showing how useful the logic of the beneficiary would still seem in the twenty-first century, as the target of progressive efforts has shifted from colonialism to global inequality.

Like admitting dependence on atrocities that occurred in a more or less distant past, this present-tense instance of the logic of the beneficiary works in the mode of the sublime: the system is too big and too complexly interconnected to take in all at once or to grasp with our usual moral categories. Thus it, too, has the potential to be paralyzing politically. Orwell's "you acquiesce in it" seems intended to make you stand up and stop acquiescing, but it also makes such a disruption sound improbable. The tone is a bit like that of "all of us without exception," which tries to generate a movement in favor of global justice, but in so doing erases the differences by which political conflict has traditionally been defined, and therefore makes political action require a heroic self-overcoming—the overcoming not of political enemies, but of human nature itself. That's an overstatement, but it has a kernel of truth. From the perspective of the beneficiary, a politics of global redistribution demands disinterestedness. Disinterestedness is usually thought of as antithetical to politics. A disinterested politics would mean that you, the beneficiary, would have to break with yourself—to be inconsistent.

MORAL INCONSISTENCY is not the only fault Noam Chomsky, an unexpected opponent, finds in BDS, but it is by far the most compelling part of his indictment. Writing in the *Nation* in July 2014, he argues that calling for

the recognition of the rights of Palestinian-Israelis to full equality, as BDS does, “at once opens the door to the standard ‘glass house’ reaction: for example, if we boycott Tel Aviv University because Israel violates human rights at home, then why not boycott Harvard because of far greater violations by the United States?” Chomsky adds a pragmatic consideration: initiatives vulnerable to this *tu quoque* reaction have predictably been failures. They will continue to be failures, he goes on, “unless educational efforts reach the point of laying much more groundwork in the public understanding for them, as was done in the case of South Africa.” Leaving aside the interesting pragmatic qualification (which is almost an about-face, encouraging us to keep working for BDS after all), Chomsky seems to take the “people in glass houses” point as the final word. Chomsky finds BDS so vulnerable to that argument because, down and dirty, he agrees with that argument. Who are we Americans, with our shameful, genocidal history, to boycott anyone? Shouldn’t we just boycott ourselves?

Todd Gitlin, writing in *Tablet*, sounds more plausible than most critics of BDS, in part because so many academics declare themselves against boycotts as such while Gitlin gives examples of boycotts he has supported, like Montgomery, apartheid, and grapes. But he fritters away that plausibility by making a rhetorical move that is all too familiar in Middle East debates: Exaggerating the Evil of the Enemy. BDS, he pretends, expresses “one group’s desire that another disappear.” This is because, he says, BDS aims at the return of all lands colonized by Israel, meaning everything since 1948. Never mind that this statement is untrue (the movement explicitly restricts the demand to lands colonized *since 1967*, in other words to the West Bank). As in South Africa, what

it asks is not anyone’s disappearance, but everyone’s agreement to abide by the same legal framework. Gitlin’s exaggerated fear stems from the logic of the beneficiary: built on a series of injustices, Israel is surely being asked to surrender all the benefits of those injustices, and just as surely would disappear if it did so. Gitlin, whether he realizes it or not, seeks to reconcile himself to past atrocities in order to defend the state of Israel as it exists, to suggest that what it achieved must not and cannot be given away.

Both the advantages and the disadvantages of the logic of the beneficiary become clearer when critics of BDS turn to the third plank in its platform: the right of return. Gitlin treats as a dealbreaker the right of Palestinian refugees to return to their homes, which he understands as a disguised demand for the one-state solution. Chomsky argues that the right of return has no meaningful international support and is not dictated by international law; to insist on it, he concludes, is “a virtual guarantee of failure.” Many other two-staters see the right of return as largely symbolic, though not lacking in urgency, and (like many of the demands made by Native Americans) open to being dealt with by monetary and other, more creative forms of compensation. Gitlin prefers not to acknowledge the possibility of pragmatic compromises. For him, as for Shavit, this is an all-or-nothing, love-it-or-leave-it proposition.

On the other hand, he is onto something more substantive when he brings up “the question of who, exactly, is a refugee.” And this point brings us back to the question of how logic of the beneficiary works differently as applied to the past and to the present.

To ask who can count as a refugee is to assert that the passage of time has ethical consequences. Palestinians who were driven out in 1948 are certainly refugees. Does the

same hold for their descendants who have never lived within the 1948 borders? And the descendants of the descendants? Whatever the horror, it becomes less and less actionable with the years. Time eats away at the rights of even the most violently victimized of victims. This is the point that Walter Benn Michaels raised in his pungently absolutist way (no bleeding-heart liberal he) when he suggested that for Americans today to apologize to the Native American victims of genocide or the African-American victims of slavery would mean “apologizing for something you didn’t do to people to whom you didn’t do it (in fact, to people to whom it wasn’t done).” Faced with blatant injustice, it is profoundly disturbing to think that the mere passing of years should make any ethical difference at all. And yet there is no denying that to some degree it does, and must. It must, even if you know that the Israelis have been cynically playing out the clock, waiting for refugees to die off and calculating that the issue will die with them.

For Shavit, what is given is the past. For Gitlin (at least when he talks about the right of return), the past is leaking away by the minute, and must be allowed to do so. Presumably this holds as much for the victims of the Holocaust as for the victims of the Nakba, though it would be helpful if he would say so. Thus Gitlin, too, nods to the logic of the beneficiary. Most of those now living in what were once Palestinian homes in Palestine, he suggests, will not be evicted—and presumably the same holds for those non-Jews living in what were once Jewish villages in Eastern Europe. Most of those who have benefitted from these mass murders and expulsions cannot be asked to forfeit their undeserved privileges. Historical continuity between past and present may be real, but it is unsustainable. If you tried to hold in your mind a full, unfading

picture of every injustice, its pain and horror as fresh as the instant it was perpetrated and suffered—if every day the whole school made a mandatory daylong visit to the atrocity museum—you know in advance what would be the result. There would be no forgiving or forgetting. Without those, it is hard to imagine how life as we know it could continue. To borrow from George Eliot: we should die of that roar that lies on the other side of silence.

There is thus a certain sad wisdom in the pragmatic presentism that is America’s default setting where its own sins are concerned. Confronted with an atrocity-filled history, people will say: I wasn’t there, it’s not my fault, and anyway, it was so long ago. Bygones really should be bygones. When I asked my Russian-immigrant barber what he thought about Tom Brady’s responsibility for the deflated footballs in last year’s NFL playoffs, he replied: “What’s done is done.” This sounds somewhat lacking in moral sensitivity. It will certainly not encourage those promoting reparations for Native Americans or African Americans. But it is something the promoters of reparations will have to reckon with.

Rather than simple amorality, it is better understood as the obscure, imperfect fragment of another morality. It assumes something like the following: Moral consistency is unobtainable. Injustice is what you should expect. It’s how the world is. Whether I suffer or benefit from the current dispensation, I was not put on earth to redeem it. I have to work with what I have been given. As long as you don’t try to grab what I have, I will leave you in peace to deflate your footballs.

I suspect that, for better or worse, these sentiments help explain the rhetorical force of the anti-BDS position on the left. What is so compelling about Chomsky’s argument? Is it the warning to would-be stone throwers

with breakable windows that they are hypocrites? (Or merely vulnerable to other stone throwers? The ambiguity is there in the proverb.) Yes, many of us feel more comfortable blaming ourselves than blaming others. But here Chomsky merely echoes a sentiment the Israeli street has been muttering for years. As Amos Oz puts it in *The Slopes of Lebanon* (1989), “Nobody’s any better than we are, so they should all shut up.” The flaw in the glass-house argument seems transparent. You can’t criticize except from a position of moral purity. You don’t occupy a position of moral purity. Therefore you can’t criticize.

The inference is wrong because the major premise is wrong. You don’t have to occupy a position of moral purity in order to criticize. The position you occupy ought to be irrelevant.

Ought to be. But is it? Chomsky assumes that the position you occupy is not irrelevant. And it is this assumption, despite the vast political differences between him and Shavit, that gives their arguments a similar character. Chomsky builds his argument on America’s bloodsoaked history. For him, too, the blood we have shed remains definitive of who we are. Shavit and Chomsky are at one in taking collective violence as essential, unendingly constitutive and morally decisive, and they echo much recent political theory on the left. “All Nation-States are born and found themselves in violence,” Jacques Derrida writes in his essay “Forgiveness”: “the moment of foundation, the instituting moment, is anterior to the law or legitimacy which it founds. It is thus outside the law, and violent by that very fact.” This is not something you will hear from the Netanyahus and other joyously uninhibited racists. But by now it is not alien to educated common sense. Who has not nodded sagely at the idea that the state of exception reveals the truth of the norm, and that every liberal

democracy has its origins in bloody atrocities that it then has to cover up? It should come as no surprise that we now hear it from the more sophisticated apologists for Israel, those like Shavit who are willing to name the Nakba and admit how badly Israel behaved to the Palestinians in 1948. After all, they will say, founding a nation is no dinner party. Its aim is not universal justice. Look at what the US did as it was forming itself into a nation-state.

Critics have suggested that Chomsky is lapsing from his ostensible universalism when he blames the US, and only the US, for most of the world’s injustice, thereby leaving other factors invisible and letting other guilty parties off the hook. In what looks like a preemptive strike against this criticism, Chomsky has written, “The most elementary moral principles would lead to ‘playing up’ the crimes of domestic origin in comparison to those of official enemies, that is, ‘playing up’ the crimes that one can do something about.” The “what one can do something about” criterion rehabilitates the seemingly discredited notion of a proper or natural sphere of influence. It permits Chomsky to embrace an upside-down version of Shavit’s patriotism. If Shavit finds that the nation, by necessity, requires acts of transgressive violence, Chomsky in turn feels that those acts of transgressive violence necessarily limit our actions to the sphere of the nation. America First: first as an object of critique, and first as a field of action. The nation is founded in violence. Therefore what you say and how you act cannot be determined by laws or universal principles alone. Your politics is not serious unless its priorities are dictated by where and when you happen to live, what nation you happen to belong to. If everyone were responsible for everything, no one would really be responsible for anything. We have a greater

responsibility to speak up about those things that are at hand, and therefore subject to our power to affect them.

In order to be actionable, then, principles must always be put through the filter of proximity. What really matters is what is close at hand. This would be a rather forceful challenge to cosmopolitanism's old-fashioned call for a primary concern with the welfare of humanity at the expense of local loyalties. It can go in scary directions. Stand your ground—fight for what happens to be yours without pausing to ask how you happened to acquire it. Yet it can also generate a cosmopolitanism of its own: technological advances and new transnational networks and organizations have vastly increased the portion of social reality that must now be considered knowable and actionable. The line separating near and far isn't where it used to be. The fact that Israel is so afraid of boycotts gives them a very intimate feel.

As it happens, "what one can do something about" is really an argument for BDS, not against it. Chomsky seems to feel that our leverage as Americans should be used only against the United States. But why? The demand that the US cut its aid to Israel unless Israel obeys international law in no way contradicts or excludes BDS. And which after all is more proximate to you, the US government or the churches, universities, professional associations, and other institutions where BDS has taken root? "Those dedicated to the Palestinian cause," Chomsky warns in his subtitle, "should think carefully about the tactics they choose." Cutting off US aid to Israel, the tactic Chomsky says he prefers, is not actually a tactic at all. It's not a means to an end; it is the end. Pull that off, and it's game over. A tactic, on the other hand, is precisely what BDS is. It deploys immediately available means, a wide variety of existing institutions, memberships,

pressure points. America First? It's these institutions and memberships that you will encounter first, well before you get anywhere near the levers of national power. In that sense BDS better satisfies Chomsky's moral imperative: to work with what is at hand, "what one can do something about."

There is a simpler way to say this. BDS is not aimed at repairing the original injustice of the Nakba. It's much too late for that. Nor is it about achieving moral consistency. That it is always too late for. It's about having maximum impact on the policies toward the Palestinians that the state of Israel is currently pursuing, policies that even the cleverest of Israel's supporters must be very acrobatic in order to defend. BDS offers solidarity to Palestinians now, solidarity in a form that Palestinian civil society has said it wants. If there is an inconsistency in this—a failure publicly to recognize or appreciate the extent to which Americans ignore their own bloody history—it is one that must be embraced, in order to achieve the goals that we want.

IN A WORLD erected on atrocity, the desire for moral consistency will often look counterproductive, a goad to the wrong sorts of actions (militarism in the guise of self-defense) or a paralyzing inhibition of other actions that might be useful, like consumer boycotts or BDS. It deserves some measure of respect, if only because we need it so badly when we contemplate, say, injustice at the global scale. In his play *The Fever*, Wallace Shawn tries to look through commodities to see the social relations that lie on the other side. And as soon as he does, he finds the act of looking unbearable. It delivers a sense of the world that the human eye or heart was simply not constructed to sustain—a truth, but one we are not equipped to handle.

A naked woman leans over a fence. A man buys a magazine and stares at her picture. The destinies of these two are linked. The man has paid the woman to take off her clothes, to lean over the fence. The photograph contains its history—the moment the woman unbuttoned her shirt, how she felt, what the photographer said. The price of the magazine is a code that describes the relationships between all these people—the woman, the man, the publisher, the photographer—who commanded, who obeyed. The cup of coffee contains the history of the peasants who picked the beans, how some of them fainted in the heat of the sun, some were beaten, some were kicked.

For two days I could see the fetishism of commodities everywhere around me. It was a strange feeling. Then on the third day I lost it, it was gone, I couldn't see it anymore.

As it happens, he does get it back. On the one hand, the logic of the beneficiary leads Shawn no further than self-recrimination: "The life I live is irredeemably corrupt. It has no justification." This is not the stuff of politics as traditionally conceived. Imagine founding a political party by denouncing an injustice and then trying to recruit your entire membership among those who profit from that injustice. On the other hand, it's too soon to give the logic of the beneficiary either a thumbs-down or a thumbs-up. Where would the movement for global justice be if it could not find some political use for such epiphanies?

In this respect the past is different. Any debt to the living takes precedence over any debt to the dead. The recognition that we

inhabit the site of violent injustices committed long ago matters if there is something to be done by or for those now alive whose lives have been visibly shaped by those injustices. The most eloquent champions of reparations to African Americans, like Tanehisi Coates, insist on how a racism that is now illegal continues to push its dirty fingers into the present, choking off black lives by such palpable, measurable means as redlining. This is the obvious answer to Walter Benn Michaels's argument that apologies or reparations offered many decades later would not be addressed to those who actually suffered the wrongs in question. By the criterion of continuity between past injustice and present suffering, the same holds for the Native Americans and the Palestinians. Those who are still on the fence about BDS may be encouraged by the thought that it is not first and foremost about the past, but the response to an active call for solidarity from Palestinians whose rights are not respected today.

But the argument for reparations is not equally valid in every case. It can't be taken for granted that effects always do persist into the present in a meaningful way and to a meaningful degree. The presentness of the past should not be treated as if it were a moral postulate and thus did not need the verification that Coates's research so amply offers. Some past atrocities should be left unwept and uncommemorated. Close off that possibility, and you risk an inflation of moral responsibility that will make all debts unpayable. Rule out any limit to the accumulating of multitudinous guilts, and you slip back into the domain of original sin. The result will be backlash, a reflex circling of the wagons around what you have been given.

"One cannot escape the question," Coates writes, by "disavowing the acts of one's ancestors, nor by citing a recent date of

ancestral immigration. The last slaveholder has been dead for a very long time. The last soldier to endure Valley Forge has been dead much longer. To proudly claim the veteran and disown the slaveholder is patriotism à la carte.” I imagine Michaels would reply that he himself does not “proudly claim the veteran” nor feel any need for patriotic celebrations. By disowning July 4, he gets to disown the slaveholder as well. Even those who reject this radical individualism, which can be indifferent to the past because it acknowledges no membership of any kind, will want to keep a claim to indifference—indifference to that part of the past that can just be let go. +