

Vilifying Israel, Corrupting the University

RCP realclearpolitics.com/articles/2018/04/14/vilifying_israel_corrupting_the_university_136808.html

COMMENTARY



AP Photo/Adel Hana

Partisanship plagues the humanities. The proliferation of intensely politicized scholarship denouncing Israel as a criminal state exemplifies the conflation of activism with systematic inquiry and analysis. That conflation subverts the dedication to truth indispensable to the university's mission.

Last fall in his book “Industry of Lies,” Israeli journalist Ben-Dror Yemini extensively documented the variety of falsehoods that established scholars—along with seemingly reputable journalists—peddle to portray Israel, the only liberal democracy in a region awash in religious fanaticism and sectarian strife, as a uniquely racist country.

The slanders keep on coming. In January 2018, Critical Inquiry—a peer-reviewed journal published by the University of Chicago—featured a 27-page cryptically titled essay, “Apartheid / Apartheid/ [].” Edited by W.J.T. Mitchell, a University of Chicago professor of English and art history and a proponent of an academic boycott of Israel, Critical Inquiry boasts that it “has been called ‘one of the best known and most influential journals in the world’ (Chicago Tribune) and ‘academe’s most prestigious theory journal’ (New York

Times).” With “Apartheid / Apartheid/ [],” the esteemed academic platform may have set a new low in passing off demonization of Israel as carefully researched and cogently argued scholarship.

The author, Saree Makdisi, maintains that Israel is a “starkly racial state” that embodies a form of apartheid, or institutionalized racial discrimination, that is “worse” and more “relentless” than that which prevailed in South Africa. While South Africa openly named its injustice, Makdisi argues that Israel “at every possible turn resorts to linguistic tricks and verbal sleights of hand” to disguise the racism that pervades it. Whereas “South African apartheid was biopolitical in nature—concerned with the management and administration of living black labor,” Israeli apartheid is, he writes, “necropolitical—concerned with the destruction and erasure of Palestinians.”

Presumably, a scholar arguing in a respected academic publication that Israel—on both sides of the Green Line that separates it from the West Bank and the Gaza Strip—perpetrates injustices that exceed those of apartheid South Africa would possess broad training in history, comparative politics, and law. Makdisi, however, is a professor of English and comparative literature at the University of California, Los Angeles.

This is not to suggest that professors must stick to their specialties nor to deny the value of interdisciplinary study. Indeed, the lengthy, detailed, and devastating critique of Makdisi’s essay published earlier this month in the British journal Fathom by my colleague Russell Berman, professor of comparative literature and German studies and Hoover Institution senior fellow at Stanford, and Cary Nelson, emeritus professor of English at the University of Illinois, shows that scholars can productively venture beyond their expertise. Respect for facts, dedication to systematic and independent research, and commitment to the truth—virtues that, traditionally, all academic disciplines sought to instill—make the difference.

In “Anti-Zionism and the Humanities: A Response to Saree Makdisi,” Berman and Nelson exercise these virtues in demonstrating that Makdisi’s central claims, offered in “a voice of unquestioning infallibility,” are not merely dubious or incorrect but wildly at odds with the evidence. Determined to place Israel beyond the pale, Makdisi eschews the scholar’s obligation to grasp complexities—in this case the tragic conflict between Israel and West Bank and Gaza Palestinians, and the nation’s struggle to ensure protection of the equal rights of its minority populations. He favors instead the crusader’s moral certainties and the polemicist’s smokescreens and subterfuges.

To illustrate the racism that allegedly permeates Israel, Makdisi asserts that “every major South African apartheid law has a direct equivalent in Israel and the occupied territories today.” Berman and Nelson refute the absurd claim by providing numerous examples of South African apartheid laws that have no counterpart in Israel and the West Bank (Israel withdrew from Gaza in 2005). They observe, moreover, that Israel—in sharp contrast to the Palestinian Authority in the West Bank and still more Hamas in Gaza—protects fundamental

freedoms beginning with speech and religion and guarantees the equal rights of all citizens. They note the 18 Arab members of Israel's 120-seat Knesset, the three Arabs who have served as Supreme Court justices, numerous Druze military commanders, and an Arab who holds the number-two position in the police force. And they ask, "What were the equivalent positions in public life for Blacks in apartheid South Africa?"

To bolster his contention that Israel systematically enforces inequality, Makdisi writes, "[N]owhere in Israeli law is the right to equality protected." In reply to this manifestly untrue statement—which contradicts Makdisi's charge that Israel conceals its racism by touting its righteousness—Berman and Nelson observe that Israel's Declaration of Independence promises full equality of rights to all citizens. Former Israel Supreme Court President Aharon Barak has affirmed the declaration's constitutional status and court decisions have frequently stated that Jewish and non-Jewish citizens are equal before the law. Israel has incorporated equality into major legislation. And Israel's "Basic Law: Human Dignity and Liberty" (1992) proclaims, "There shall be no violation of the life, body or dignity of any person as such."

To maintain that Zionism is a form of racism, Makdisi defines race in terms of "national or ethnic origin." As Berman and Nelson indicate, "[B]y this definition, the Danes, the Germans, and the Irish, among other nationalities, are each a race." In fact, the Jewish population of Israel comprises not only individuals of European descent. According to Berman and Nelson, "[D]escendants of Jewish immigrants from Arab countries now constitute over half the population." Israel is also home to some 120,000 black Ethiopian Jews. Non-Jews of every race, nationality, and ethnic origin, Berman and Nelson stress, can convert to Judaism. And, contrary to what Makdisi implies, there is nothing unusual about a liberal democracy that is the nation-state of a distinct people—constituted by a common language, culture, religion, history, and sense of political destiny—and which guarantees equal rights to all citizens regardless of race, national or ethnic origin, religion, or gender.

Even when Makdisi has a point, he obfuscates to vilify. For example, he condemns as an example of Israel's surpassing racism a controversial law that allows rural communities to bar admission to those "who do not suit the lifestyle and social fabric of the community." Such vague criteria are certainly open to abuse in a free society. Makdisi does not mention, however, that the law is restricted to communities of fewer than 400 families in the Negev and Galilee and it explicitly prohibits discrimination on the basis of race, religion, gender, or nationality; that the state is obligated to allocate land on a non-discriminatory basis; and, while declining to invalidate it, the Supreme Court indicated its willingness to review implementation of the law.

Berman and Nelson know that Israel—like all liberal democracies—in practice falls short of its principles. They recognize the country's continuing battle to protect minority rights. They welcome a rigorous accounting. Their objection is to Makdisi's use of propaganda cloaked as scholarship to depict Israel as the embodiment of political evil in our time.

His Cultural Inquiry essay is, Berman and Nelson argue, “symptomatic of a widespread institutional corruption that extends far beyond the debates over the Middle East.” By giving an imprimatur to partisan broadsides that adopt the trappings of scholarship—university validation, peer review, elaborate footnotes, authoritative pronouncements—academic journals present a “threat to the credibility of the humanities in the contemporary university and in the public eye.”

Exposing the fabrications, omissions, and distortions that serve as tools of trade for the intensely politicized scholarship targeting Israel does more than protect the Jewish state’s interests. By defending the university’s mission to pursue truth, it also benefits liberal democracy in America.

Peter Berkowitz is the Tad and Dianne Taube senior fellow at the Hoover Institution, Stanford University. His writings are posted at PeterBerkowitz.com and he can be followed on Twitter @BerkowitzPeter. He is also a member of the State Department’s Policy Planning Staff. The views expressed are his own and do not necessarily reflect those of the United States government.