

# Progressives, Israel, and the New Morality

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## ABSTRACT

*In contexts other than the Israel/Palestine issue, progressives celebrate pluralism, the multiplicity of different perspectives, and the impossibility of one “master narrative” to annul that diversity.*

*Yet, in relation to Middle East politics, pluralism shuts down, and the Palestinian claim, manifesting itself in the fantasy of the secular one-state solution, is so powerful as to undermine the validity of any Jewish claim.*

*In a strange turn, literary theorists and cultural critics are often vocal supporters of BDS, in fetishizing the land and the kind of irrefutable claim it is meant to give to Palestinians.*

*In appropriating the languages of good and evil, often reinstating the Holocaust narrative with Jews as perpetrators, such rhetoric creates a dangerous either/or that fanatics – both Arabs and Jews – exploit.*

From her platform at the Women’s March in January 2019, Linda Sarsour denounced anti-Semitism and then unsurprisingly promoted her anti-Israeli agenda: “We will protect our constitutional right to boycott, divest and sanctions in this country.” Earlier this year, Congresswoman Ilhan Omar recycled

one of the oldest of anti-Semitic tropes – remember ‘it’s all about the Benjamins, baby’ – and in a halfhearted apology went on to question Jewish loyalty to America after having compared AIPAC to the National Rifle Association (NRA) and the fossil fuel industry. With their support for BDS, Sarsour and Omar, the American purveyors of a new progressive anti-Semitism, have managed to reinstate an allegorical worldview of absolutes, of good and evil. But unlike in the conventional tale, the Jews are not heroes but villains. As the literary critic George Steiner noted, Western culture had always “blamed” Jews for the introduction of moral absolutes and the impossible standards accompanying them. Today, for progressives, Jews still anchor a binary moral universe, representing, however, not good but evil. Contemporary progressives have hijacked liberalism, replacing pluralism with a backward-looking moral agenda.

In regard to Israel/Palestine, when describing the competing claims for the land, progressives, if acknowledging Israel claims *at all*, dismiss them by associating them with the regressive theological text that no longer has currency, the Bible. Against this claim from the antiquated book, there is the visible and empirically compelling claim: in 1948 Palestinians were living on the land, *their* land. About this claim to the physical title to the land, the progressives are absolutist, and they brook no possible counterclaim.

In contexts other than Israel/Palestine, progressives celebrate pluralism, the multiplicity of different perspectives, and the impossibility of one “master narrative” to annul that diversity. Yet in relation to Middle East politics, pluralism shuts down, and the Palestinian claim, manifesting itself in the fantasy of the secular one-state solution, is so powerful as to undermine the validity of

any Jewish claim. In a strange turn, literary theorists and cultural critics – often vocal supporters of BDS – follow the likes of Sarsour and Omar (no pluralists themselves) in fetishizing the land and the kind of nonrefutable claim it is meant to give to Palestinians.

The very same humanities professors cite Benedict Anderson's *Imagined Communities* to argue that nations are socially constructed, that nationhood is the product of shared narratives and discourses. But in the conflict between Arabs and Jews, Palestinian claims are determined to be, without any self-consciousness, objectively *real* and *true*, while the Jewish claims, textual as they are, are merely fictional. Like Anderson, the Palestinian nationalist Edward Said cited the importance of literary and cultural representations of nationhood – “national identity does not exist independent of the narratives that speak of it.” But in current iterations of BDS, Jewish claims to Israel are relegated to the historical dustbin. In the terms of the critical theorist Judith Butler – a vocal advocate of BDS – nationality, like any form of identity, is a “performance.” In regard to Palestine/Israel, however, the empirical not only takes precedence over storytelling but rules out the latter altogether.

More than ancient coins with Hebrew inscriptions, the books Jews read, the stories Jews tell, the volumes on which Jews have provided commentary for 2,000 years, as well as the prayers they have recited, testify to the validity of their claim to the land. Of the 19 blessings that constitute the center of the three daily Jewish prayer services, six are directly concerned with the Land of Israel: the prayer for rain; the prayer for the return of justice; the prayer for the ingathering of the exiles; the prayer for the rebuilding of Jerusalem; the prayer for the return of the Davidic dynasty; and the prayer for the return of worship to the Temple in Jerusalem. The patriarchs are promised the land in Genesis; in Exodus, Moses and the people of Israel inherit it. Whether my ancestors in Europe had suitcases packed under

their beds awaiting the Jewish messiah and travel to Israel is not as significant as the mythography itself. Jews for millennia have written about the land, longed for the land, and some indeed lived in the land.

I am not rehearsing features of Jewish liturgy and sacred texts to convince Palestinians or anyone else to acquiesce to Jewish claims. Nor am I citing the Jewish Library – there *is no* independent Zionist Library – because I imagine that such claims are irrefutable. I do not want to convince others that my claims are valid for them, but that they are valid *for Jews*, valid *for me*. But remarkably today, progressives do not consider Jews to have any valid claim to the Land of Israel. They see the conflict exclusively through the lens of a colonialist narrative, and in the process propound a worldview in which Jews are *just* usurpers.

It might be reasonably asked, with the existence of the Jewish state an undeniable, even intransigent reality, why does the progressive rhetoric espousing BDS even matter? But in appropriating the languages of good and evil, often reinstating the Holocaust narrative with Jews as perpetrators, such rhetoric creates a dangerous either/or that fanatics – both Arabs and Jews – exploit. As the late Israeli author Amos Oz said before his death, the one-state solution will only come to the region through catastrophe and ultimately, the unthinkable *again*, genocide. Oz warned that nurturing that fantasy – normative among many millennials with little historical consciousness – not only encourages Arab extremists but also Jewish fundamentalists who counter with their own version of the one-state solution. Extremists love the dance of codependency: the current prime minister's embrace of extremists as part of his reelection campaign is a case in point. Progressives and the far right are engaged in that dance, trying to draw the rest of us in.



Linda Sarsour and Harvard professor Cornel West listen as Democratic presidential hopeful Bernie Sanders, I-Vt., speaks at a roundtable discussion at the First Unitarian Congregational Society on April 16, 2016, in Brooklyn, New York.

Photo: AP Photo/Mary Altaffer

Far-right fundamentalism is not difficult to unmask. But progressives veil their fundamentalism with the rhetoric of liberalism. In the process, the morality of the West for which the Jews were once blamed gets turned on its head. Now in the guise of Zion, the Jew represents, for the progressive cosmos, a reminder of an older worldview, a manifestation of evil. The brilliant paradox of this strategy, always implicit in BDS rhetoric, is to sell this binary worldview to genuine liberals, a community that values pluralism, while all the time amplifying their own jeremiads against Israel. In the name of that pluralism, progressives return the world to simple absolutes, with Jews again their guarantor, but this time not from a divine Heaven but an Israeli Hell.



An anti-Israel demonstrator in Lyon, France, 2016.

Photo: Konrad K./Sipa