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ESSAY



## Compulsory Zionism and Palestinian Existence: A Genealogy

Umayyah Cable

### ABSTRACT

This essay offers a genealogy of the phrase “compulsory Zionism” in order to illuminate its vexed and contradictory intellectual foundations, the ethical and political stakes of the discourse surrounding the phrase, and its accompanying racial project. Scholars of late have taken up the use of this phrase to signal how “common-sense” knowledge about Palestine and Israel is naturalized in ways that privilege Israel and subjugate Palestinian existence. However, I argue that the phrase is also useful for understanding how Palestine solidarity politics are micromanaged within transnational leftist social justice movements and academia.

### KEYWORDS

Zionism; Palestine; Israel; solidarity; activism; anti-Semitism

IN FEBRUARY 2009, “with initial hesitation but finally strong conviction,” poet and scholar-activist Adrienne Rich released a statement endorsing the U.S. Campaign for the Academic and Cultural Boycott of Israel (USACBI).<sup>1</sup> Her statement came shortly after Israel had waged a three-week war against the Gaza Strip that killed approximately one thousand Palestinian civilians, including more than three hundred children and one hundred women.<sup>2</sup> Rich’s statement represented a small victory for Palestine solidarity activism in the U.S. culture war over Israel and Palestine. She wrote: “As an American Jew, over almost 30 years, I’ve joined with other concerned Jews in various kinds of coalition-building and anti-Occupation work. I’ve seen the kinds of organized efforts to stifle—in the US and elsewhere—critiques of Israel’s policies—the Occupation’s denial of Palestinian humanity, destruction of Palestinian lives and livelihoods, the ‘settlements,’ the state’s physical and psychological walls against dialogue—and the efforts to condemn any critiques as anti-Semitism.”<sup>3</sup> She briefly explained her hesitation at the idea of an academic and cultural boycott before outlining how and why cultural and academic institutions are “implicated with state economic and military power” in perpetuating oppression and state violence. In closing, Rich reiterated her “continued solidarity with the Palestinian people’s long resistance” and with Israeli academic and cultural workers “who oppose the means and ends of the Occupation.”<sup>4</sup>

The word “Zionism” does not appear in Rich’s statement. As the ideological foundation for the creation and expansion of a Jewish state in contiguous Palestine, political Zionism is manifested both within the territory of the State of Israel and in Israel’s occupation of the Palestinian territories. Israel’s military occupation, and subsequent civilian settlement, of contiguous Palestine’s geographic remnant in 1967 was simply the means for political Zionism to attain its maximalist expansion: Eretz Israel (Greater Israel). Thus, any critique of the occupation that does not address its ideological foundation is incomplete. While condemned as both illegal and morally wrong by the United Nations as well as myriad governments, human rights organizations, and people of conscience, the land-grabbing, ethnic-cleansing, and apartheid-like conditions characteristic of Israel’s occupation of the West Bank and Gaza Strip are

merely the exacerbated and more visible exemplars of policies and practices *within* the state that are otherwise conveniently overlooked. Rich's specific demand for an end to the occupation without reference to the whole of Israel's apartheid apparatus at large signals *continued* hesitation to confront the occupation's ideological lynchpin, Zionism.

Rich's reticence to name Zionism reads as a form of political correctness. Although the rebuke of political correctness has typically been a rhetorical strategy used by the Right to target leftist social and political projects in an effort to distract from the key issues and arguments, I use it here to reference a method of managing the parameters of leftist discourse.<sup>5</sup> Analyzing Rich's statement as part of a longstanding discourse yields great insight into the power relations that shape knowledge production about Zionism and Palestine in the U.S. context. What Rich does not mention in her 2009 letter endorsing the academic and cultural boycott of Israel is that she herself had previously been an influential voice in what she calls "efforts to condemn any critiques [of Israel's policies] as anti-Semitism."<sup>6</sup> Reading the 2009 statement in relation to earlier public letters she had authored on the topic of Israel and Palestine, her silence around Zionism takes on even greater significance,<sup>7</sup> especially in light of her support for the Boycott, Divestment, Sanctions (BDS) call. Eschewing direct condemnation of Zionism implies its tacit endorsement; it is a betrayal of what Rich describes as "continued solidarity with the Palestinian people's long resistance."<sup>8</sup> This rhetorical slippage is an example of what has been called *compulsory Zionism*, a discourse that operates to produce "common-sense" knowledge about the Israel-Palestine question in ways that naturalize and privilege Israel, subjugate Palestinian existence, and micromanage the politics of solidarity within transnational leftist social justice movements.

In recent years, the phrase compulsory Zionism has garnered much attention in ways that absent its vexed and contradictory intellectual and political foundations. This essay offers a genealogy of the phrase to illuminate the ethical and political stakes of the discourse and its accompanying racial project. In their essay, "The Forgotten '-ism': An Arab American Women's Perspective on Zionism, Racism, and Sexism," Nadine Naber, Eman Desouky, and Lina Baroudi outline how Zionism constitutes "a politically organized racial project that directly and systematically targets Arabs and Arab-Americans" in the U.S. context.<sup>9</sup> Following Michael Omi and Howard Winant, who define a racial project as "an interpretation, representation, or explanation of racial dynamics, and an effort to reorganize and redistribute resources along particular racial lines,"<sup>10</sup> I assert that compulsory Zionism is invested in interpreting, representing, and explaining Israel and Palestine in ways that reorganize and redistribute political solidarities and social movement aims along racial and ethnic lines.

Here, I will begin by historicizing the ways in which compulsory Zionism has been rooted in European anti-Semitism and heteropatriarchy before tracing how its functioning has impacted the power relations of Palestine solidarity politics in the United States to further invisibilize Palestinians.

## History of Compulsory Zionism

The term compulsory Zionism has been used at different times throughout the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries to represent a variety of ideologies, social relations, and political projects. According to Ella Shohat, "Zionism had been a minority movement among world Jewry" prior to the Holocaust, particularly among the Sephardim and Mizrahim.<sup>11</sup> In the

European context, as Gisela C. Lebzelter argues, early Zionist ideology displayed an uneasy relationship to anti-Semitic social and political fantasies of segregation and of the expulsion of European Jews. One of the earliest occurrences of the phrase is found in William Arkwright's 1914 novel, *The Trend*. During a brief dialogue about contemporary European politics, Robert, one of the protagonists, is asked what he thinks about the burgeoning political ideology calling for the establishment of a Jewish national state. Robert scoffs at the notion of Jewish self-determination, and his virulent anti-Semitism is made plain as he sarcastically concedes: "If it were to be *compulsory* Zionism . . . every Englishman would thankfully subscribe, I'm sure!"<sup>12</sup> Lebzelter uses the phrase to describe precisely the kind of political anti-Semitism prevalent during the interwar period in England, wherein "compulsory Zionism was advocated as a peaceful 'final solution'" at a time when the British fascist movement supported the establishment of a Jewish national homeland to justify the expulsion of Jews from England.<sup>13</sup> The origins of compulsory Zionism as a racial project are deeply rooted in political anti-Semitism.

How, then, did compulsory Zionism go from a form of anti-Semitism to a willingly adopted nationalist ideology and, even further, to a weaponized form of cultural hegemony deployed to punish and ostracize those who speak out against it? The ideological thrust behind the concept of compulsory Zionism shifted markedly after the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948. The anti-Semitism that influenced non-Jewish support for Zionism did not disappear in the wake of World War II and the Holocaust. Rather, Zionism took on new significance in the postwar era of decolonization. For European Jewish refugees and Holocaust survivors, the creation of the State of Israel became a moral necessity for refugee resettlement. For the non-Jewish European and U.S. public and politicians, the creation of the State of Israel represented a politically benevolent solution to the problem of Nazi imperialism, akin to the creation of independent nation states in Africa, Asia, and Latin America in the wake of British, French, and Spanish imperialism. In sum, as the political context shifted in the aftermath of World War II, Zionism was refashioned for the era of decolonization, and *compulsory* Zionism went from politically abhorrent to politically correct.

In a 1992 article in the newsletter of the Alternative Information Center in Jerusalem, Israeli scholar Erella Shadmi put forth a new conceptualization of compulsory Zionism as it pertains to Jewish Israelis. In direct reference to Rich's concept of "compulsory heterosexuality," Shadmi writes of compulsory Zionism within Israeli society in the 1950s and 1960s as "an uncompromising demand, enforced by means of a wide range of methods, to adopt the values, attitudes, and behaviors prescribed by Zionist ideology. Each and every Israeli was expected to follow the socially approved and sanctioned norms and to be committed and loyal to the collective will."<sup>14</sup> Zionism is an ideology that was developed by Western Europeans and emerged in the Western Europe context, and in turn the "socially approved and sanctioned norms" Shadmi refers to here are European in origin. Therefore, those within Israeli society who fall outside of Eurocentric norms or who otherwise may hinder or jeopardize the reproduction of European culture and bodies—namely Sephardim and Mizrahim, as well as homosexuals and feminists—must be coerced to conform, or be punished. Shadmi's discussion of compulsory Zionism offered a feminist approach to understanding the racial, gender, and sexual management of Jewish identity and cultural norms within the State of Israel. Isis Nusair later deployed Shadmi's understanding of the phrase compulsory Zionism to explore the effects of Israeli society's masculinist militarization and culture on social relations between Israeli and Palestinian women.<sup>15</sup> Shadmi and Nusair's references to compulsory Zionism emerged as a

useful theoretical framework to understand cultural hegemony within Israel. That said, those references remained just that, and the concept remained undertheorized. Furthermore, in Shadmi's original reference to the phrase, she absents contemporary Arab feminist scholars and activists who influenced her gender and sexual critique of Zionism.<sup>16</sup> I emphasize this last point because it gets to the heart of the problem with compulsory Zionism: that it functions to obscure Palestinian intellectualism, labor, and existence.

While writing my dissertation, I further theorized the notion of compulsory Zionism to reconceptualize how Zionism influences society, culture, education, and politics *outside* the Israeli context and particularly with regard to Palestinian subjectivity—namely within the diasporic context of the United States and Canada and the realm of North American cultural hegemony.<sup>17</sup> Scholars Lara Deeb and Jessica Winegar have since taken up my discussion of compulsory Zionism to describe how the silencing and censorship of Palestine studies and activism in U.S. higher education has operated through the policing of disciplinary boundaries.<sup>18</sup> Such policing has not merely impacted knowledge production about Palestine, Israel, and the Middle East at large. It has also functioned to silence, punish, and disappear not only Palestinians, but Arab and Muslim scholars more broadly, within certain academic disciplines and subfields. It is this latter point—how compulsory Zionism works to silence, punish, and disappear Palestinians—that is key to understanding how it operates to authorize and manage Palestine solidarity politics in ways that “fit” the neoliberal multicultural fanfare of US academia and that further relegate Palestinian existence to the realm of impossibility. My intervention lies predominantly in my consideration of how compulsory Zionism, as a form of cultural hegemony, manages *who* participates in Palestine solidarity activism and academic scholarship, as well as *how* and *when* solidarity with Palestine is represented, authorized, and deployed.

Here, I would like to reiterate my previously stated definition of compulsory Zionism in order to make clear the distinction between the term's old and new usages. In the contemporary context of the United States, compulsory Zionism manifests as a hegemonic discourse—the unwavering support for Israel and unwillingness to critique Zionism that have dominated U.S. culture and politics for decades. As such, it constitutes a racial project, one that is invested in interpreting, representing, and explaining the political, human, and environmental conditions in Palestine and Israel in ways that reorganize and redistribute political solidarities along racial and ethnic lines. Compulsory Zionism operates discursively to naturalize and privilege Israel as an ethnonational state and further subjugate Palestinian existence. Ultimately, as demonstrated by Naber, Desouky, and Baroudi, the deployment of compulsory Zionism within Palestine solidarity circles has functioned to subordinate Arab and Arab American participation within leftist activism at large and Palestine solidarity activism in particular. In sum, post-World War II compulsory Zionism differs from that of the pre-World War II period in that the “compulsory” component has shifted from institutionalized policy to cultural discourse, and the target of racialized discrimination has shifted from Jew to Arab.

Indeed, the title of this piece, “Compulsory Zionism and Palestinian Existence,” is a riff on Rich's quintessential 1980 essay (“Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence”) to illustrate how the power differentials between Palestinian subjectivity and Zionism as an institution are reproduced through leftist academic and activist discourses. In other words, compulsory Zionism is to Palestinian existence as compulsory heterosexuality is to lesbian existence. In the 1980 essay, Rich put forth a scathing critique of heterosexism within feminist

theory and scholarship. She identified heterosexuality as a “political institution” of male dominance that “has had to be imposed, managed, organized, propagandized, and maintained by force.”<sup>19</sup> A key method of enforcement, Rich argued, was evidenced in the heterosexism of the era’s feminist scholarship that treated lesbian existence as cursory, aberrant, and invisible, if not altogether impossible. Feminist theory’s elision of lesbian existence, and the compulsory heterosexuality perpetuated by that elision was, according to Rich, “actually working against the liberation and empowerment of women as a group.”<sup>20</sup> By absenting lesbian existence, heterosexuality is not merely naturalized, it is enshrined as compulsory by the very women it subjugates. Likewise, the prevalence of compulsory Zionism within Palestine solidarity academic and activist circles has at times rendered Palestinian existence invisible and impossible. Ultimately, this process of displacement works against the liberation and empowerment of Palestinians as a diverse group by displacing actual Palestinians from the field of their own representation.

## About the Author

*Umayyah Cable* (they/them/their) is assistant professor of American culture and film, television, and media at the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor. They are completing a book project on the history of media activism in the mobilization of Palestine solidarity activism in the United States.

## Endnotes

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