Apartheid Israel: Effective Propaganda or Counter-Productive Discourse

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“Morals, shaped by the form and needs of action, become man’s most natural implement when exhorting to action. As implicit in censorial words, they are the linguistic projection of our bodily tools and weapons. Morals are fists.”

---Kenneth Burke, Permanence and Change: An Anatomy of Purpose

One of the most effective and, at the same time, most dangerous “censorial words” regularly employed in the Israel/Palestine conflict is “apartheid.” Without broaching the substantive question of the degree to which Israeli policies may or may not be regarded as analogous to South African apartheid, this paper will examine the possible impact of the widespread deployment of the analogy. On the one hand, the linking of Israel to the now totally discredited South African regime aptly described by Nelson Mandela as the “skunk of the world” would seem to have great potential as a mobilizing tool in generating formidable international (and especially U.S.) pressure on the Israeli government. As Haaretz journalist Chemi Shalev has put it, “the apartheid label hangs over Israel’s head like [a] Damocles sword.” On the other hand, I will suggest that peace activists and opponents of the Israeli Occupation have not paid sufficient attention to the manner in which the apartheid accusation plays into and reinforces the most basic existential fears and alarmist propensities in Israeli political culture, thereby closing off space for meaningful Israeli concessions. In particular, I will seek to develop this argument through a historical analysis of a pattern that has marked relations between Jews and Palestinian Arabs since at least the issuance of the Balfour Declaration, a pattern in which elements on both sides intermittently but unconvincingly attempt to neutralize the fears of their enemies by disclaiming the intention to pursue “maximalist” goals. Thus, for example, Zionist leaders employed various circumlocutions (such as the need for a “home” or a “homeland”) before the 1940s to obfuscate their ultimate objective to create a Jewish state, a strategy which Israelis today routinely attribute to Palestinians whose stated willingness to settle for a state in the West Bank and Gaza is seen as a mere “first step” in the continued pursuit of their supposed “maximalist” goals. Since apartheid is a now universally acknowledged symbol of evil that was (at least politically and legally) defeated and eliminated, the rhetoric of “apartheid Israel” seems perfectly suited to feed into and augment Israeli and Jewish existential fears that what Palestinians “really” want and what they would continue to seek after the establishment of a truncated Palestinian state is the destruction and elimination of Israel. Therefore, while the apartheid analogy may well be helpful in creating the international pressure necessary to bring Israel back to the negotiating table, in further inflaming Israeli fears and mistrust, it would also seem to further subvert the possibilities for successful negotiation and a viable and lasting peace.