Intervention

Progeny of Empire:
Defining Moments of Nation Formation
in South Africa and Palestine/Israel

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On November 2, 1917, British Foreign Secretary Arthur Balfour wrote to Lord Walter Rothschild requesting that he "bring this declaration to the knowledge of the Zionist Federation":

> His Majesty's Government view with favour the establishment in Palestine of a national home for the Jewish people, and will use their best endeavours to facilitate the achievement of this object, it being clearly understood that nothing shall be done which may prejudice the civil and religious rights of existing non-Jewish communities in Palestine, or any rights and political status enjoyed by Jews in any other country.

At the time so-called "non-Jewish communities" comprised 94% of the population of Palestine. For most of them the Balfour Declaration was an unmitigated disaster, the first in a series of ongoing wars (Khalidi 2021).

The Balfour Declaration "changed the course of world history" and "was the single most important event in the history of Zionism prior to the establishment of the state of Israel" (Lewis 2021: 164.). Along with Balfour and Prime Minister Lloyd George, the third

key participant in the Balfour Declaration was Lord Alfred Milner, who also played a central role before and after the Anglo-Boer War (1899-1902) in the formation of what became South Africa in 1910. Several of Milner's key assistants in South Africa were also subsequently instrumental in the Balfour Declaration—from which we are now witnessing intensifying fallout.

The Balfour Declaration figured prominently in my life from an early age. I grew up in Johannesburg down the road from Balfour Park, then a small shopping center in a predominantly Jewish suburb, in the 1950s—the first decade of South African apartheid and the formation of Israel, each launched in 1948. Both my parents were fervent Zionists, my non-Jewish mother (fueled by the antisemitism of her father) even more than my father (whose family fled to London at the turn of the 20th century to escape the pogroms in Odessa). They saw Israel as the solution to antisemitism, and would brook no criticism of the Jewish settler colonial state. Over the years my growing awareness of the violent dispossession of Palestinians through which Israel had been formed, and its resonances with the horrors of apartheid South Africa, led to heated debates with my parents.[1] Those debates continued until my father died in November 1998.

Amid the terrible violence now engulfing Palestine/Israel, disproportionately directed against Palestinians, two longstanding controversies have risen to the fore: [i] the dangerous and increasingly influential claim that anti-Zionism or any critique of Israel is necessarily antisemitic; and [ii] understandings of Israel as an apartheid state. My aim here is to confront and counter the equation of antisemitism and anti-Zionism by recognizing the value of—but also reaching beyond—the apartheid analogy.

I do so by situating both South Africa and Palestine/Israel in a global comparative and spatio-historical frame. My focus is on how South Africa and Palestine/Israel have been forged as nations since the 19th century as creatures of British imperialism through distinct but deeply connected histories of settler colonialism and racialized dispossession. I

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[1] Formative in my thinking was Stanley Greenberg's (1980) comparative study *Race and State in Capitalist Development*.

point as well to the consolidation of fundamentalist religious nationalisms in the inter-war years in South Africa, Palestine, and many other regions of the world. These processes continue to play out in relation to one another in ways that are crucial to disentangling antisemitism from anti-Zionism, including criticism of Israeli policies and state practices. This global and historical frame also points to the multiple ways that Europe and North America are deeply implicated in the horror unfolding in Palestine/Israel in both the past and the present; and how Palestinians have been and are being made to pay for crimes of such Euro-American antisemitism.

Debating Antisemitism, Anti-Zionism, and the Apartheid Analogy

The past 20 years have witnessed escalating efforts in and beyond the Israeli government to conflate criticism of the state of Israel and its grounding in Zionist ideology with antisemitism and hatred of Jews. Nathan Thrall (2018) describes how Israel's propaganda campaign behind this conflation was ramped up in reaction to the formation and growing influence of the BDS (Boycott, Divestment, Sanctions) movement in 2005. Further impetus came from the 2009 UN report headed by South African jurist Richard Goldstone on the 2008-9 Gaza war, which killed 13 Israelis and around 1,400 Palestinians (United Nations 2009). Eerily foreshadowing the present war, Goldstone found that both Israeli and Palestinian armed groups had committed war crimes; that Israel had launched "deliberate attacks on civilians" with "the intention of spreading terror"; and that the ongoing blockade of Gaza constituted a possible crime against humanity. Together with the Gaza war, the Goldstone report dramatically bolstered BDS and threatened Israel's global standing.

Israel's response was to turn the Ministry of Strategic Affairs into a command center for what its director general, Yossi Kuperwasser, called "the battle against BDS"— focused on his gendered assertion that "Anti-Zionism and antisemitism are the same lady in a different cloak" (cited in Thrall 2018). Accusations that any criticism of Israel and/or Zionism is necessarily antisemitic have a long history, but since 2009 they have become widespread and enormously influential. Versions of it have been adopted by, among others, the US State Department, the Labour Party in the UK, and the International Holocaust

Remembrance Alliance (IHRA) that now includes 35 member countries, mainly in Europe and North America, as well as Argentina, Australia, and Israel.[2] In addition, a wide array of organizations deploy accusations of antisemitism to discipline and punish critics of Israel and supporters of Palestine—nowhere more actively than in North American colleges and universities.

Accusations of "apartheid Israel" have also provoked fierce denials from Zionist forces. In fact, BDS distinguishes between apartheid defined as a crime under international law, and comparative understandings of Israel and the South African apartheid regime (see, for example, Jamjoum 2009). Along with several other human rights organizations, BDS bases its claims that Israeli policies and practices constitute apartheid crimes against humanity on the 1973 United Nations International Convention on the Suppression and Punishment of the Crime of Apartheid, and the 2002 Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court.

Turning to the apartheid analogy, a key moment was the 2001 World Conference Against Racism in Durban, when Israel and the US walked out to protest references to Zionism as apartheid racism. One useful resource on the apartheid analogy is the Israeli organization B'Tselem.[3] Another is the collection on *Apartheid Israel* in which editors Jon Soske and Sean Jacobs (2015: 5) emphasize that, for all the obvious differences between South Africa and Israel, the analogy with apartheid challenges claims of Israel as "a besieged democracy defending its very existence against the threat of outside terrorism" (see also Clarno 2017; Pappé 2015). Rather than coming from the "outside", Palestinian resistance is an inevitable response to occupation and forced displacement. In fact, years before the present violence, a number of South African struggle veterans considered conditions in Palestine/Israel far worse than those in apartheid South Africa. Soske and Jacobs also observe that the apartheid analogy underscores the relevance to Palestine/Israel

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[2] See https://holocaustremembrance.com/who-we-are/member-countries (last accessed 31 January 2024). For a critical analysis of the IHRA, see Friedman (2023: 31-38).

[3] See https://www.btselem.org/apartheid (last accessed 31 January 2024).

of how the struggle against apartheid forged connections between opposition within South Africa and international solidarity.

Far less useful in my view is a widespread propensity to use apartheid and/or South Africa in relation to Palestine/Israel as an a-historical ideal type to which arbitrary—and often demonstrably incorrect—claims are attached. Such tendencies have been ubiquitous in the vast outpouring of commentary since October 7, 2023, and have helped propel my efforts to reframe understandings of South Africa and Palestine/Israel in relation to one another.

Defining Moments of Nation Formation:
South Africa and Palestine/Israel in a Global Comparative Frame

Currently I am working on a project that seeks to bring South Africa, India, and the US into the same global conjunctural and comparative frame to understand the rise of fundamentalist religious nationalisms, virulent forms of racism and xenophobia, and populist politics since the end of the Cold War.[4] Closely attentive to changing forms of imperialism, the framework views South Africa, India, and the US as neither pre-given national units nor variations of a broader process, but rather as historically specific yet interconnected sites in the *production* of world-wide processes. It focuses as well on race/racism, gender/patriarchy, nationalism, religion, and other dimensions of difference as active constitutive forces in relation to class processes.[5] Undergirding this frame is the idea of *global conjunctural moments*, defined as major turning points when interconnected forces at multiple levels and spatial scales in different regions of the world have come together to generate new conditions with world-wide implications and reverberations. Comprehending forces operating since the end of the Cold War requires going back to earlier global conjunctural moments—most immediately, the late 1940s and the late

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[4] In a 2024 article in *Antipode*, "Modalities of Conjunctural Analysis", I discuss this frame in relation to the work of both Stuart Hall and Antonio Gramsci.

[5] Rather than "intersectionality", I draw on a dialectical conception of articulation (Hart 2024: 141-145).

1960s/early 1970s, but also historical processes of racialized dispossession, labor exploitation, and imperialism through which South Africa, India, and the US were formed as nation-states in key conjunctures in the 19th and first part of the 20th centuries: [i] the rise of British imperialism and industrial capitalism in the early 19th century following the American, French, and Haitian Revolutions and the Napoleonic Wars (1780-1815); [ii] the Age of Empire (1870-1914) and World War I; and [iii] the Interwar conjuncture (1918-1939).

Let me turn now to outline how we might stretch this frame to illuminate key processes of nation formation in South Africa and Palestine/Israel prior to the late 1940s as closely related progeny of the British Empire through processes that continue to reverberate in the present.

British Imperialism and the Rise of Industrial Capitalism in the Early 19th Century

Following Britain's defeat in the American War of Independence, the British East India Company expanded from its base in Bengal to conquer much of India between 1783 and 1818, prompting Napoleon's comment that the Battle of Waterloo had been lost in India. British interest in both Southern Africa and Palestine was initially geopolitical and strategic, arising in the Age of Revolution and intensifying at the end of the Napoleonic Wars—but then moving in different directions over the 19th century.

In 1806 Britain took over the Cape Colony from the Dutch, initially to protect the passage to India. By 1820 the Cape had become a dumping ground for surplus populations generated by the industrial revolution, provoking violent territorial battles with indigenous populations in the Eastern Cape. British takeover of Natal in 1843 unleashed further conflict with the powerful Zulu kingdom that was only defeated in 1879. In contrast to its growing reliance on extraction from India, the British Empire was relatively indifferent to its economically stagnant Southern African colonies and to the two republics formed by the incursion of Dutch settlers into indigenous territory to escape British control. The opening of the Suez Canal in 1869 diminished the geopolitical significance of Britain's Southern African colonies, but discoveries of rich diamond and gold deposits in the Boer republics

in the latter part of the 19th century led directly to the Anglo-Boer War (1899-1902) and the formation of South Africa as a nation in 1910.

With the growing instability of the Ottoman Empire in the early 19th century, "Palestine and the near east had emerged as an area of general political interest following Bonaparte's defeat, with Britain now keenly aware of the importance of a land bridge to India" (Crome 2021: 239). The turn to Palestine in this moment of empire was deeply entangled with the British Protestant evangelical desires to restore Jews to Palestine, which some scholars trace to the growing importance of territoriality in 16th century England: "This concept of nations mapped to firmly bounded physical territories resonated with the Old Testament promises to Jews to establish them in a land with firm territorial boundaries" (Crome 2021: 64-65). In the 19th century, evangelical Restoration movements in Britain transmuted into Christian Zionism as an increasingly influential political movement.

Indeed, the Balfour Declaration "owed more to [British] Christian Zionists than to any weight of worldwide Jewish support for a national home in Palestine" (Thompson 2021: 55). This movement can be traced to Lord Shaftesbury, who succeeded in appointing a British vice consul in Jerusalem in 1838 with "impeccable evangelical credentials" and constructing a church designated as a chapel attached to the British consulate (Lewis 2021: 117). Drawing on his mentor Edward Bickersteth, a leading evangelical Anglican clergyman, Shaftesbury proclaimed Palestine as "almost without an inhabitant—a country without people, and look! Scattered around the world, a people without a country". His slogan "a country without a nation for a nation without a country" was embraced later in the 19th century by the Jewish Zionist movement—which took shape in response to horrendous pogroms in Russia and Eastern Europe from the 1880s—as "a land without a people for a people without a land" (Lewis 2021: 119-120). Both Lloyd George and Balfour were devout Christian Zionists, whose apparent philo-Semitism encompassed strong anti-Semitic strains exemplified by mounting concern over Britain's "Jewish Question". As Prime Minister in the early 20th century, Balfour was instrumental in passing the 1905 Aliens Act that restricted Jewish immigration to Britain. As we shall now see, the

broader racialized dynamics of imperialism, operating in part through South African connections, were also crucial to the Balfour Declaration and its aftermath.

Nation Formation in the Age of Empire (1870-1914) and World War I

As part of the comparative project outlined above, I point to colonial India and the territory that became South Africa as interconnected outposts of the British Empire that were vitally important to its existence. In complementary ways they underwrote Britain's capacity to exercise global political-economic dominance through the operations of the Gold Standard in the face of intensifying global tensions. Viewed from this perspective, the Union of South Africa (1910) and the Balfour Declaration (1917) appear as related moments of nation formation, deeply tied in with one another and the broader imperial processes that culminated in World War I.

Let me start with South Africa. In the Reconstruction period following the Anglo-Boer War, British liberals—working in alliance with mining capital—were actively involved in cementing segregationist principles, policies, and practices more than 40 years before the advent of apartheid. This period needs to be understood in the context of related processes underway before the war: rapid capitalist development driven by the minerals revolution that generated escalating demand for labor, and the rise of "scientific racism" and new forms of segregation actively promoted by British colonial officials—most prominently Lord Alfred Milner, British High Commissioner of South Africa from 1897 to 1905. After the war Milner worked closely with the mining industry to "wrest vast quantities of unskilled, cheap and coercible labour out of conquered African kingdoms … African lands which had been successfully defended against settler encroachment in the nineteenth century could subsidise the welfare costs of the mining industry and lower wages. Bolstered chiefly authority could help maintain social control" (Marks and Trapido 1987: 7-8). Official segregationist ideology was also concerned with "the building-up of local white nationalism … sufficiently strong to resist the perceived 'black peril' of African political activism" (Rich 1990: 55).

Following Milner's departure, his so-called "Kindergarten"—a select group of Oxford-educated British officials whom he had gathered to continue his efforts—worked assiduously to reconcile Boers and Britons by seizing upon racial difference "as a means of persuading white South Africans to bury their internal differences" (Dubow 1997: 77-78). Exclusion of the large Black majority from the 1910 settlement enabled passage of the 1913 Natives Land Act, which prohibited Africans from owning or renting land beyond the boundaries of reserves defined at the time as 7% of the land area—but it also mobilized what became the African National Congress. Milner and several key members of his Kindergarten were major players in the formulation of the Balfour Declaration.

A month after the Declaration was sent to the Zionist Federation—but not to any Arab officials in Palestine—British troops marched into Jerusalem. Working with the London Zionist Bureau, British officials moved rapidly to set up the Jewish Section of the Department of Information, a massive propaganda machine aimed at demonstrating to "world Jewry that the rebirth of the Jewish nation under British auspices was nigh" (Renton 2007: 9). In 1922 the League of Nations awarded Britain the Mandate over Palestine, the terms of which Zionist activists played a major role in crafting. Hence widespread understandings of the Balfour Declaration as the benevolent first step in the providential unfolding of a pre-ordained process that led directly to the formation of the state of Israel. Such interpretations were rampant in 2017, during the centenary celebration of the Declaration in the British House of Lords.

More critical understandings stress that, far from inevitable, the "Balfour Declaration was the highly contingent product of a tortuous process characterized … by contradictions, deception, misinterpretations and wishful thinking" which, in its lead-up, "sowed dragon's teeth. It produced a murderous harvest, and we go on harvesting even today" (Schneer 2010: 369-370). These contingencies include the fall from power in 1916 of Prime Minister Herbert Asquith, who had "scant interest in Palestine, and none in Zionism" (Thompson 2021: xii)—making way for Lloyd George, Balfour, and other adherents of Christian Zionism who worked closely in alliance with Jewish Zionists. The latter actively fomented anti-Semitic understandings of a coherent, inordinately powerful

"International Jewry", for whom moves towards a homeland in Palestine would ensure their support for the Allies at a crucial moment in the war. In fact, at the time Zionism was a minority position in Judaism, fiercely opposed by orthodox as well as assimilationist Jews. They included Edwin Montagu who, as Secretary of State for India, submitted a memorandum to the British Cabinet on "The Anti-Semitism of the Present Government" in August 1917 alleging that policies in Palestine would "prove a rallying ground for Anti-Semites in every country in the world"; lead them to get rid of Jewish citizens; and result in "a population in Palestine driving out its present inhabitants".[6] This view was widely shared by Jews in different regions of the world.

In addition to the alliance between Christian and Jewish Zionists, James Renton maintains that "the policy-makers behind the Balfour Declaration were influenced by the racial nationalist thought that came to dominate British culture during the Great War", and that these presumptions of "scientific racism" and racial hierarchy, which took hold in the late 19th century, meshed closely with Zionist self-representations and demands (Renton 2007: 13). In a chapter on "Perceptions of Jewry and Ethnicity in the Official Mind", he pays specific attention to the racial nationalist character of Milner's thought, as well as that of his protégé from South Africa, Leopold Amery, who was appointed to the War Cabinet secretariat in 1917 (Renton 2007: 15).

I suggest that the practical involvement of Milner and his Kindergarten in forging a seemingly "successful" settler colonial nation in South Africa in the first decade of the 20th century was deeply connected with the Balfour Declaration, and its aftermath. More than just influencing "the official mind", a key imperial transmission point between South Africa and Palestine was the Round Table, an "informal brains trust" formed by members of Milner's Kindergarten in 1910, for whom South Africa represented "a fascinating laboratory for experimenting with new forms of imperial government" (Rich 1990: 57). Following the change in government and the ascension of Milner to the War Cabinet,

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[6] See https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/montagu-memo-on-british-government-s-anti-semitism (last accessed 31 January 2024).

members of the Round Table—many of whom also held strategic positions in the Lloyd George administration—played a central role in the Balfour Declaration, and in promoting pro-Zionist policies in Palestine after the war.[7] These South African connections are crucial to grasping the racialized practices and processes of dispossession, exclusion, and settler colonial nation formation in Palestine in the Interwar years that led up to the founding of the state of Israel in 1948.

Reverberations in the Present

Although the brevity of this essay precludes elaborating key dynamics in the Interwar conjuncture, let me gesture to two related processes between 1918 and 1939 in South Africa and Palestine that I will expand in future work. First is the explosion of multiple antagonisms among Black South Africans and Palestinians towards settler colonial forms of oppression, along with intensified anti-colonial nationalisms since the 1920s, which have moved in very different directions over the past century. Second is the growth and consolidation in the Interwar years of fundamentalist religious nationalisms by white Afrikaners and Jewish settlers, both of whom saw themselves as God's chosen people— and many still do.

From this perspective, Zionism in the Interwar years appears as part of a family of fundamentalisms that also includes white Christian Nationalism in the US, Hindutva in India, and Political Islam. All took hold in the 1920s-1930s; re-emerged with a vengeance from the early1970s amid worldwide political and economic upheavals; and remain powerfully salient in the present (Hart 2021; Kepel 1994). These affinities help explain how many conservative evangelicals who are openly antisemitic can readily proclaim themselves Christian Zionists who strongly support the right-wing in Israel and are deeply beloved by Benjamin Netanyahu and his henchmen—along with those such as Steve Bannon and Elon Musk, both widely known for their antisemitic statements and pro-Zionist sentiments.

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[7] On the importance of the Round Table, see Stein (1961: Chapter 20).

More generally, as we have seen, not only can antisemitism and pro-Zionism co-exist—they have been doing so for a *very* long time. Also, both historically and in the present, anti-Zionism is *not* necessarily antisemitic—far from it. We need firmly to reject the assertion that "Anti-Zionism and antisemitism are the same lady in a different cloak", and recognize the distinct but intertwined histories of antisemitism and Zionism.

What made Zionism distinctive was both the Holocaust *and* antisemitic restrictions on Jewish immigration to the US, Britain, and Western Europe, stretching back to the 1905 Aliens Act in Britain and the 1924 Johnson-Reed Act in the US that not only hindered Jewish immigration to the US, but "powerfully signalled to numerous other countries that there was no moral objection to their acting in a similar way" (Thompson 2021: 298). In the years immediately following World War II, the US and other governmental signatories of the International Refugee Organization established in 1946 considered Jewish survivors of the Holocaust "too damaged, too clannish, too dangerous, and either incapable or unwilling to do the hard work required of them" (Nasaw 2020a; see also Nasaw 2020b). Many were also denied entry on grounds of being Communist sympathizers. Such restrictions serve as a salutary reminder of how deeply implicated Euro-America is in the horrendous violence engulfing Palestine/Israel.

What also needs to be kept front and centre are the histories of how Palestinians have been forced to pay for these and other crimes of Euro-American antisemitism, and continue to do so in the present. A key element of these histories, I have argued, is how British colonial officials, working in conjunction with Zionists, applied to Palestine lessons learned in South Africa at the turn of the 20th century.

Let me conclude by reflecting briefly on the political stakes of the global comparative and conjunctural frame that informs this essay. For Antonio Gramsci, conjunctural analysis—simultaneously spatial, historical, and comparative—was crucial to political strategy, enabling what he called "prevision", understood as a method of political work that allows the present to be seen differently in order to intervene and change it.[8] In a

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[8] I discuss prevision more fully in Hart (2024).

necessarily compressed way, I have tried in this essay to suggest the insights to be gained by moving beyond the apartheid analogy to unearth deeper dynamics and connections that could have gone in different directions—and that have the potential for contributing to a politics of alliance.

As I bring this essay to a close, the International Court of Justice (ICJ) in The Hague has just made an interim ruling in the case of South Africa v. Israel. Although falling short of demanding an immediate ceasefire in Gaza that many had hoped for, the court granted many of the actions South Africa had requested to prevent genocide in Gaza. What needs to be underscored is that the case before the ICJ is the consequence of massive popular mobilization and activism in South Africa, including the group South African Jews for a Free Palestine.[9]

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[9] See https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=T9JQAcMXrCQ for a discussion of SAJFP's analysis of interconnected struggles and the politics of alliance (last accessed 31 January 2024).

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