

Media Coverage, Public Discourse, and Power (or the lack thereof): Further Reflections on the Israeli Apartheid Week 2017

“If you're not careful, the newspapers will have you hating the people who are being oppressed, and loving the people who are doing the oppressing.”

- Malcolm X, “The Ballot and the Bullet,” Cleveland, Ohio, 1964

Worldwide, many activists and sympathizers see attempts at intimidation, such as those that recently occurred in connection with the Israeli Apartheid Week (IAW) in Vienna and elsewhere, as attacks on the freedom of expression.

We have resisted speaking of a “restriction of freedom of expression” and of “censorship” because no state institution (until now) forbids us to seek and obtain permission for demonstrations for the worldwide Boycott-Divestment-Sanctions Campaign, nor does the state deny us these rights for presentations on the subject of “Apartheid in Israel” or similar topics. The right to publicly promote the non-violent, anti-racist, and human-rights-based demands of Palestinians is not denied to us by the state. And, unlike in Israel, where the call for boycotts is now legally sanctioned,[1] there is no censorship in Austria.

In his story “The Lost Honor of Katharina Blum or: how violence develops and where it can lead,” the author and humanist, Heinrich Böll, described in very impressively how media reports promote relations based on violence and power, and how they reproduce the powerlessness of the victims. His story was published in the mid-seventies, but it is even more relevant today, in the age of the Internet and social media, which spread (fake) news and defamations even more rapidly and widely. Excluded From the Media: Opposition Voices, Unwelcome Facts

On March 14, 2017 an “article” about BDS, without mentioning its name, appeared in one of the largest cost-free newspapers in Austria, “Heute” (Today). With a circulation of 13.8% of the national readership it is the second most read newspaper in the country. Its title blared, “Vienna: No Place for Israel Haters,”[2] and quoted Raimund Fastenbauer, General Secretary of the “Israelitischen Kultusgemeinden” (IKG, the Jewish religious communities in Austria). Contrary to facts, and, as he has done repeatedly, Fastenbauer compares the BDS campaign demands to the Nazi-Fascist slogan “Don’t buy from Jews.” Just as false, as we do not tire to point out, is his insinuation that BDS calls for the boycott of Jewish individuals and has “anti-Semitic characteristics.”

Mr. Fastenbauer is intelligent enough not to mention individual names in his Nazi-comparison and the accusation that BDS harbors anti-Semitic motives. BDS, as a campaign and a movement, is not a person in the legal sense and cannot initiate legal complaints for character assassination, misrepresentation, or similar offenses. The “Heute” article also maintains that the Arcotel Kaiserwasser, contrary to our account, cancelled our rental agreement because of “operational infeasibility.” However, the Email correspondence between BDS Austria and the hotel’s management confirms our presentation of the facts, and can readily be published with the management’s agreement.

On March 15, 2017 a second article about BDS appeared in the same newspaper, which in addition to making false statements also flagrantly omitted relevant information.[3] The article quoted the owner of the Café Rathaus to the effect that at the time he agreed to make the room available he was not informed that BDS Austria was the organizer of the planned event, nor about the contents of the presentation. This is simply untrue. In addition, it should be noted that BDS already used these facilities in March of last year, to hold a press conference, on short notice, which dealt with similar interventions against the Israeli Apartheid Week 2016.[4]

This year, however, the owner of the Café Rathaus was subjected to massive pressure via Emails and telephone calls – even the smashing of windows was threatened. Although the owner’s withdrawal from the agreement remains incorrect, it is understandable in these circumstances. However, in the pages of “Heute,” these attempts at intimidation do not deserve any mention. Instead, the paper maintains that “In another matter”, i.e. the planned showing of a film by the “Women in Black” in the Amerlinghaus, the “BDS background was hidden.” By means of such questionable reporting it is suggested that BDS Austria had consciously deceived the public, and the well-meaning management of the Amerlinghaus by acting under another name.

The truth, however, is so much simpler: BDS Austria has no copyright on the Israeli Apartheid Week. We cannot control or determine, which groups or individuals want to respond to the BDS call, or whether in part or entirely. For example, the “Women in Black (Vienna)” have supported the principles of the BDS movement since long before the founding of BDS Austria and continue to do so on their own and sometimes in cooperation with us. The current discourse, poisoned as it is by the racism of papers such as “Heute” and the likes of Raimund Fastenbauer, compels us to mention that the founder of “Women in Black (Vienna)” is a Jewish-American activist with Austrian citizenship who has lived in Vienna for decades. A call to our media spokesperson would have sufficed to prevent the spreading of such false information. But characteristically, neither the online portal “vienna.at”, which also reported about us,[5] nor “Heute” contacted us. Responses were sought only from the IKG, the Arcotel Kaiserwasser, the Café Rathaus, and the Amerlinghaus. The facts are that the Arcotel Kaiserwasser, just as the owner of the Café Rathause were harassed to such an extent that they felt compelled to forego the filing of a complaint with the police for duress. In making statements or answering questions from journalists and even the police, the businessmen concerned were careful not to discuss these threats - understandably, because even the admission of yielding to intimidation could have negative consequences for their business.

Whoever the people who telephoned the Arcotel Kaiserwasser and the Café Rathaus were, and although some posed as representatives of the IKG, it is clear that they not only resorted to mafia-like methods, but simultaneously asserted a hegemony over the discourse concerning Israel by preventing a presentation that linked Israel to the practice of Apartheid. Every one of these incidents is documented on the Facebook page of the Anti-BDS Platform (which is in part supported by members of parliament and other representatives of the SPÖ, the Greens, and the Austrian University Students Association (ÖH)) and includes their expressions of approval and joy.[6] However, the threats and intimidation attempts that caused the cancellations are never mentioned.

A further example of how BDS Austria is covered by the media, but is never allowed to speak for itself, can be found in the Austrian daily, “Der Standard,” which is generally said to be among the

“quality” media of the country. On March 9, 2017 and again on March 14, 2017, an interview with Benjamin Fischer, the President of the European Union of Jewish Students, appeared[7] - at first in the University-Print edition, and then in the regular online edition. When asked about anti-Semitism among students, Fischer mentioned the role that the “Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions” movement supposedly plays in this connection. He criticized the movement for equating Jews with the state of Israel and that BDS targets Jews for harassment. When asked directly about his experiences with the Israeli Apartheid Week in Vienna, Fischer made vague references to incidents in Great Britain and “many European states.”

The author of the article did not feel obliged to verify these very serious allegations, to ask for evidence, or to do her own investigations, in spite of the fact that the internationally known BDS guidelines clearly state that the boycott is directed exclusively at Israeli institutions and international enterprises that support, defend, or profit from the Israeli occupation and Apartheid, and that it is not directed against individuals (regardless of ethnicity or religion). In the activities of the BDS, it is inadmissible to make distinctions between Jewish and non-Jewish targets, nor are such distinctions observable. Should this principle be violated, BDS Austria and BDS groups throughout the world would condemn such violations in the sharpest terms possible.

In this context, it is worth noting that a journalist of the Uni-Standard conducted a comprehensive interview with our spokesperson. The first meeting had to be cancelled due to time pressures in the editorial offices, but the article was nevertheless completed before the editorial deadline. However, it did not appear in the following edition either – due to “lack of space” according to the editor in chief, who also assured the journalist that the BDS topic was of very great interest and that it would become a point of emphasis in the following edition. None of this, however, occurred, nor has BDS heard anything from the Uni-Standard since.

Restriction of the Public Discourse

In view of this situation, the BDS events planned for the Israeli Apartheid Week 2017 could not take place in commercially available spaces. At this point, interest groups that publicly defame BDS (i.e. the group “Boycott Anti-Semitism”, parts of the SPÖ, ÖVP, FPÖ, and the Greens) and others, who intimidated enterprises that rent space, have succeeded in pushing the human rights campaign BDS into facilities that are not subject to blackmail. Without doubt this is a short-term success for the defenders of Apartheid, but the extent of the damage that political democracy sustained will have to be judged by posterity.

When, during Israeli Apartheid Week 2016, the Puls4-channel films a presentation of the Israeli activist Ofer Neiman, records video interviews with him and other BDS activists, and films the final IAW rally, but never broadcasts any of the coverage ...[8]

When the daily “Der Standard,” the weekly “Die Zeit,” and the online publication “juedische.at” make appointments for interviews with representatives of BDS Austria, do the interviews, but never publish them ...[9]

When, on the other hand, defamations and denunciations of the international BDS movement and BDS Austria in particular are printed and published without giving BDS an opportunity to respond...

When groups and initiatives that explicitly defend human rights are denied access to state-subsidized “alternative” spaces due to the direct intervention of government, and opposition party representatives ...[10]

When threats and intimidation by telephone make it impossible for legal experts to speak about Apartheid in commercially available spaces ...

When the office of the state attorney delays the investigation and punishment of a physical attack on BDS activists in the summer of 2015 in spite of detailed filmed evidence, and stops – without any procedure - the investigations into attacks on BDS informational events in front of the University of Vienna...[11]

When representatives of the SPÖ, Greens, ÖVP, and FPÖ, as well as the Anti-BDS Platform pay for expensive press releases against BDS and the Israeli Apartheid Week via the Austrian Press Agency (APA) news service in part through state subsidies, while human rights campaigns that are staffed with volunteers lack resources for continuous high-cost public relations work ...[12]

When groups supportive of BDS and initiatives such as “Women in Black (Vienna)” have their events cancelled by the “Cultural Center on the Spittelberg in the Amerlinghaus” in spite of their consideration for the precarious situation of this venue and a partial distancing from the IAW...

When the “Austrian-Arab Cultural Center (OKAZ)” is put under pressure by the KPÖ (Communist Party) and its student organization because a film is to be shown as part of the IAW program...

...then it is permissible to ask whether restrictions on the freedom of expression and censorship are not already longstanding practices.

Needed - Space for Democracy, Access to the Public Sphere

In just the month of February this year, the Israeli occupation forces arrested 420 Palestinians, including 70 minors.[13] The Israeli Justice Minister, who was responsible for this and much more, is invited by the University of Vienna to speak about human rights.[14] In the beginning of March, in of a village in the vicinity of Ramallah, the Israeli army went to the house of Palestinian activist named Basel Al Araj and murdered him.[15]

These are just some of the most recent events, small samples from the daily life of Palestinians under occupation, Apartheid, and colonization. Such reports appear rarely, if ever, in European or German-language media. At the same time, European and, especially, Austrian government representatives flock to Israel. The Austrian visitors wax enthusiastic about Israeli surveillance

technology, the systems of segregation and repression, the Apartheid wall - even as they think ever more openly about restrictions to the rights of assembly and protest in their own countries.[16]

We, as part of the international BDS Campaign, are not supposed to and, increasingly, are not allowed to denounce the Apartheid system or even to speak its name in public. Unfortunately, no one has yet informed the United Nations about this taboo: exactly in the middle of the Israeli Apartheid Week 2017 in Vienna, the news erupted that a UN Agency, the “Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia,“ has accused Israel of imposing an Apartheid regime on the Palestinian people.[17] We assume that the UN will be required to remove its agencies from Vienna in short order.

[1] <https://www.nzz.ch/empowerung-in-israel-1.11556371>

[2] <http://www.heute.at/news/politik/Wien-Kein-Platz-fuer-Israel-Hasser;art23660,1407789>

[3] <http://www.heute.at/news/politik/Vierte-und-fuenfte-Absage-fuer-Israel-Hasser;art23660,1408187>

[4] <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QjN6xr9dxck> sowie

http://www.ots.at/presseaussendung/OTS_20160308_OTS0007/bds-austria-reagiert-mit-pressekonferenz-auf-antisemitismus-vorwurfe-und-auf-den-rauswurf-aus-dem-kulturzentrum-amerlinghaus. Die Pressekonferenz war ursprünglich im Café Stein geplant, wie auch in der OTS-Aussendung nachzulesen, musste jedoch kurzfristig ins Café Rathaus verlegt werden.

[5] <http://www.vienna.at/drohungen-gegen-tagungsort-israelkritischer-vortrag-in-wien-abgesagt/5184978>

[6] <http://www.facebook.com/boycottantisemitism/>

[7] The interview appeared first in the University print edition and later in the regular online edition. <http://derstandard.at/2000053751696/Studentenvertreter-Juedische-Rechte-sind-Menschenrechte>

[8] All requests for interviews, Email interviews, personal messages and telephone interviews can be made available by us dependent only on the expressed consent of the editors and journalists concerned.

[9] See footnote 8

[10] <http://bds-info.at/stellungnahme-israeli-apartheid-week-amerlinghaus-2016/> und <http://bds-info.at/zur-aufkündigung-der-raumlichkeiten-fur-veranstaltungen-im-rahmen-der-israeli-apartheid-week-iaw-2017-durch-das-wuk/> (in the latter, particular Footnote 2, which includes the statement of the Amerlinghaus)

[11] <https://youtu.be/tjoxL4LmrgU> and <https://youtu.be/o8PpMi6mpes>

[12] <http://bds-info.at/zur-aufkündigung-der-raumlichkeiten-fur-veranstaltungen-im-rahmen-der-israeli-apartheid-week-iaw-2017-durch-das-wuk/> (see footnote 2 with the press release about IAW 2016)

[13] <https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20170306-report-israeli-forces-detained-420-palestinians-in-february/?platform=hootsuite>

[14] <http://bds-info.at/zur-aufkündigung-der-raumlichkeiten-fur-veranstaltungen-im-rahmen-der-israeli-apartheid-week-iaw-2017-durch-das-wuk/> (see footnote 6 for all the sources on the invitation of Ayelet Shaked)

- [15] <https://www.klassegegenklasse.org/jaffa-wo-bleibt-die-leiche-von-basel-al-araj/>
- [16] <http://bds-info.at/apartheid-2-0/>
- [17] https://www.democracynow.org/2017/3/16/in_historic_report_un_agency_says