

The Ghosts of Gaza

IAIN CHAMBERS

Naples, ITALY

Media Theory
Vol. 8 | No. 2 | 105-126
© The Author(s) 2024
CC-BY
<http://mediatheoryjournal.org/>

Abstract

The following observations are modified translations of articles published in the Italian daily *il Manifesto* between October 2023 and September 2024, and many were subsequently posted on the Blog of *Media Theory*. Here, I have included the references that were absent from the newspaper articles. These short pieces seek to engage with the ongoing massacre of the inhabitants of Gaza by the Israeli state and consider its implications in uncovering questions of colonialism, rights, democracy, historical memory and responsibility within the heartlands of the West itself. Written as newspaper articles explains some of the repetitions in the argument as I try to drive home specific points largely absent from the mainstream media, political pronouncements and public discourse.

Keywords

Colonial modernity, genocide, Hannah Arendt, Gaza, democracy, rights, historical memory, responsibility

Thinking beyond terrorism

If you squeeze a body hard enough, apart from the mounting pain, bones break, and eventually, blood appears. Does the state of Israel expect Palestinians to remain helots for eternity? Are we all blinded by the light of unrelenting media images of horror and mass destruction? I am, of course, referring to the programmed genocide occurring in Gaza in response to the military excursion into Israel and the killing of civilians by the armed forces of the authoritarian and radical Islamic organisation Hamas.

Beyond the spiralling newspeak of Occidental political institutions and media, we are called upon to disapprove of terrorism but not to understand it. It was also a label applied in the 1940s by the British authorities in Palestine to the militant activities of

future political leaders of the Jewish state. Its shifting significance from then to the women carrying bombs in their baskets and bags into the European quarters of Algiers, to the jailbreak and massacre perpetrated by Hamas, suggests a history rather than merely an abominable event. In Gillo Pontecorvo's *Battle of Algiers*, we see a captured leader of the FLN being asked by European journalists about the reason for their terrorist attacks. The arrested leader, Larbi Ben M'hidi, replies that if the French were to give the FLN tanks, planes, and weapons, they would fight a conventional war. Asymmetrical relations of power, both military and political, characterise all resistance movements in their struggle. Circumstances dictate the turn to armed struggle. When the Portuguese government refused to listen to Frelimo, the MPLA, and Amilcar Cabral, the resistance to colonialism in Mozambique, Angola, and Guinea Bissau had little option. Perhaps we should also recall the Tunisian Jewish writer and critic Albert Memmi's observation in *The Coloniser and the Colonized* that colonialism is a variety of fascism (Memmi, 2021). The 75 years since the foundation of the state of Israel have witnessed the constant colonisation of Palestine, brutally tearing away territory and lives from its autochthonous inhabitants. Israel, as the outreach of European guilt and power, as reparation for the Shoah and an exercise in Occidental colonialism, raises far more profound questions than the ready labels of terrorism and war in the Middle East can accommodate.

The geopolitics that permit certain powers to be exercised and others to be marginalised and crushed is not only the empirical evidence of unequal powers; it further reveals the script and location of those writing and defining the narrative. It is precisely here that Zionism dovetails with the colonial constitution of the modern world. If Israel is geographically not in the West, it is historically, politically and culturally of the West. This raises the question of the Occident, and not simply Germany, needing to transform displaced guilt for the Shoah into the altogether more arduous political and cultural task of taking responsibility for the genocidal formation of modernity from the Americas, Africa, Asia, and Oceania to the European Holocaust. This counter-narrative, already proposed by Aimé Césaire (2001) in 1950 and Hannah Arendt (2017) the following year, draws us into deeper temporalities and structural powers. Here, the contemporary and historical evidence that some lives count for more than others continually reveals the racial disposition of our colonial

constitution. To recognise this heart of darkness and our responsibility in producing the resistance to our colonial intentions leading to the brutal response of Hamas is not to justify it. Instead, it is to begin to understand that it is not so much ‘them’ but we who have produced the world that bears witness to the atrocities being perpetuated in Palestine by the coloniser. Elsewhere, in the struggles over indigenous rights in Latin America and Australia and in the postcolonial exit from the colonial apparatus of apartheid sought in South Africa, guilt is reworked into responsibility. It demonstrates that the present Occidental template of white supremacy does not necessarily have the final word.

The silence

The silence of the abyss in which the memory of the Shoah and Occidental responsibility for genocide reside is today further heightened by government and institutional silence in the face of the ongoing massacre in Gaza. Despite attempts to keep them separate and distinct and to insist that anti-Semitism is not part of the broader violence of racism, both emerge from a historical entanglement for which the West refuses to take responsibility. Trying to reason around this silence, that is, understanding genocide and ethnic cleansing not as an aberration but as an integral part of the history of Western modernity, touches on a deeper history and a more radical critical challenge. Mainstream politicians and journalists, absorbed in managing and explaining the present, are rarely willing to consider this more complex scenario.

What remains deeply disturbing, however, is the intellectual failure currently exposed by what is happening in Gaza. While in Germany, politicians, philosophers, and cultural institutions remain steadfastly Zionist in their unquestioning support for Israel, thus once again repeating a totalitarian response to the so-called ‘Jewish question’, elsewhere in Europe and the West, many intellectuals and conservative Jewish leaders have participated in this silence. They are lending support to the obscene violence and bloody dismantling of Western moral credentials and its discredited custodianship of human rights and values. As the African-American writer James Baldwin once wrote, quoting the Ike and Tina Turner song of 1964: ‘I can’t believe what you say, because I see what you do’ (Baldwin, 1966). Not surprisingly, it is from the so-called Global South that legal redress is sought to expose our hypocrisies. The

rule of law is turned against those who think only they have the authority to enforce it. It is clear that while hospitals are deliberately destroyed, universities, mosques and churches blown up, cemeteries desecrated, journalists executed, and civilians reduced to collateral damage, some lives matter more than others.

This racist disposition of power and understanding is too abrupt and brutal for political diplomacy and contemporary philosophy to recognise. Yet, it is precisely in that silence, as Hannah Arendt insisted in *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (2017), that Occidental anti-Semitism and racism reside and intertwine. Listening, absorbing, and speaking alongside that silence implies not only dismantling the brutal semantics that seemingly governs us. It also means moving into another critical and political space in which the Shoah and the histories of genocidal modernity impart a more complex and redemptive path. Silence can evoke a politics of listening and eventual understanding or indicate a void surrounded by moribund rhetoric.

In light of the recent measures proposed by the International Court of Justice regarding South Africa's accusations of genocide against Israel, the West is now vested with the responsibility to ensure compliance with the Court's rulings. This offers an opportunity to break the silence of Western complicity in the colonial intentions of the Jewish state. Not only to rethink the specificity of the precise event of the Shoah within a broader set of histories that emphasise the role of genocide in the construction of modernity, from colonial spaces to the heart of Europe, as argued by both Hannah Arendt (2017), Zygmunt Bauman (1991) and Aimé Césaire (2001) but also to untangle disturbing connections with its current outcome in the Eastern Mediterranean. Perhaps European public thought and its intellectuals should return to supporting the freedom of a more incisive discussion of this uncomfortable legacy.

The future of Israel (and its Western allies) cannot lie eternally in military occupation and colonial violence. Another post-colonial Israel, as South Africa has also taught us, could emerge by breaking away from this murderous trajectory. Precisely in the name of genocide and honour of the Holocaust, Israel's friends and allies must now look for another language to reframe better what has historically proven to be an ethically and politically doomed project. The schools, hospitals, and universities, not to mention the thousands of lives, 70 per cent of them women and children, that the West has

destroyed with its unconditional support for Israel, urge us to consider other political horizons and initiatives that lead to the necessary reconfiguration of another Israel.

Among the ruins

Gaza – the streets, the buildings, many of the people – no longer exists. Virtually all have been destroyed and wiped out by the Israeli occupation forces and one of the most powerful war machines in the world. Gaza has been occupied directly or indirectly by Israel for decades. Everyone entering and leaving the Strip is under the management of the colonial power, even building materials, medicines and medical supplies, food, water, electromagnetic waves for communications, and the banking and financial system (now frozen by the Israeli government). Everything, including land registers and birth and death records, is in the hands of the Israeli government. In a few weeks, it has gone from the world's largest open-air prison to its largest desecrated cemetery.

This is the violence of colonialism. There is no other explanation. As of 7 October, nothing commenced. That was about a brutal escape from the Israeli prison, matured over more than 75 years of colonisation and continuous oppression. So, there is a history of Palestine that is also the history of Europe and the constant denial of our responsibility.

Centuries and centuries of European anti-Semitism have been dumped in the so-called Middle East (itself a European colonial invention), discharged in the Arab world, and first offered as a space by the British Empire to a group of European Jews. It was subsequently sanctioned by guilt over the Shoah and then sealed by the refusal of European countries, after the Second War, to take in Jewish refugees who had survived extermination.

But in this way, Europe has solved nothing; it has merely shirked its responsibility by burdening the Palestinians, again in a colonial gesture, with carrying its burden and shame. From the centuries of anti-Semitism and the Shoah, it seems that Europe has learned nothing except to repeat the mantra of an emptied memory. Translated over the past 70 years into unconditional support for the State of Israel; in the end, it is

Europe and the West that created Hamas and the tragedy that is unfolding in Gaza and maturing under military rule in the West Bank.

It is we who have produced and sustained the colonial system that has enabled our appropriation of the planet, with the present practices and policies of Israel representing the height of brutal, blatant, and shameless colonialism. It is now a rogue state out of control even by its American master. However, despite its anachronism, it is part of the same grammar of white European settlements that terrorised and massacred the indigenous in the Americas, Africa, Australia, and New Zealand with ethnic cleansing and massacres of the natives.

This disturbing and embarrassing historical-political combination also explains why, with each passing week, despite the massacres that continue and Israel's refusal to respond to the demands of the International Court of Justice, the news fades from the front page, rendered marginal to avoid upsetting the status quo and perhaps address the ferocity that guarantees our sovereignty.

What remains everywhere is the structure of violence that characterises all colonial relations, both for the coloniser and the colonised. The racialisation of the world – whereby some lives are worth more than others – allowed Europe to export this violence elsewhere, to non-European spaces, until the shock of the Shoah, where for the first time these practices were exercised on European soil in a meticulously planned industrial manner on a part of the white European population in the extermination camps.

Now, these stories return; they reemerge with the bodies of migrants that we have rendered anonymous, illegal, and less than human. They return with the Palestinians and Muslims, reduced to a threat to the West and its values, to justify our fear of the other and permit us to refuse responsibility for the world we have created.

Meanwhile, while our politicians continue to blather on about two states for two peoples – impossible given how Israel has dissected and colonised the land to block any real possibility of territorial continuity for a hypothetical Palestinian state – both in Gaza and the Occupied Territories, and especially in the Palestinian diaspora, the art of survival has been translated and transformed into the survival of the arts. In

poetry and literature, film and music, and critical thinking, Palestine lives on. This poetics challenges and resists the politics of denial and death. It maintains and extends what Israel and the institutional voices of the West desire to remain anonymous and voiceless.

In laying bare the obscene violence of the First World, all the hypocrisy of the West's so-called moral values is revealed, now put to the test by the history of others who have suffered its arrogance: from Gaza to South Africa. The question of Palestine has become the laboratory of the modern world, where the untold story of the West persists and returns to encounter its ghosts.

When a so-called democracy depends structurally on the denial of rights and democracy to others, we are at the limit of our assumptions and claims, both about Israel in its confrontation with the Palestinians and the West in its relationship with the rest of the planet. That is why we have to talk about Palestine every day. Both Palestinian lives and our future depend on this conversation. As Angela Davis said recently, 'We must deposit our dreams in Palestine' (Barat, 2024).

Guilt, Gaza, and the Shoah

To consider the wall that seemingly separates official Occidental opinion – from governments to cultural and media agencies – from support for Palestinians in this historical moment touches deeper histories and their potential disturbance of existing settlements. Breaking that stranglehold becomes imperative if power inevitably speaks to power and seeks to monopolise the political lexicon by providing an all-encompassing explanation. Put bluntly, the wall is that of the Shoah and Occidental guilt. It blocks all discussion of the historical formation of both the Jewish and the Palestinian question. Insisting on the colonial constitution of our languages, politics, and understanding means to listen, really listen, to the voices of Aimé Césaire (2001), Frantz Fanon (2021), and Edward Said (2003), or Assia Djebar (1999), Sylvia Wynter (2003), and Denise Ferreira da Silva (2007), or the multiplicity of indigenous voices arriving from the four corners of the planet. It is not simply to register the other who refuses to be authorised by us and our version of the world. It is also to acknowledge and work with the persistence that others exist with their right to have rights. To insist

that only we Occidentals have access to the truth and the means to explain is to install a regime of cultural and political apartheid. It is racism.

The Shoah. The industrialised organisation of genocide on European soil against an ethnically profiled part of its native population reveals not only the banal consistency of our murderous modernity famously evoked sixty years ago by Hannah Arendt (2022), later by Zygmunt Bauman (1999) and today in Jonathan Glazer's stunning film *A Zone of Interest* (2024). It also drops us into the dark recesses of archives where we confront how, across the centuries and the globe, Europe has systematically slaughtered those deemed inferior, identifying populations beneath the measure of Occidental 'civilisation' and 'progress' who could be worked to death and then eliminated in the capitalisation of national identity and territorial control.

This is not to relativise the Shoah. Instead, it is to insist on the critical beam it casts into the troubled contours of more profound and longer histories. The Shoah was not spontaneous or simply a breakdown in German culture. Its possibility had been cultivated for centuries in European anti-Semitism, seeded in Christian fundamentalism, and then 'secularised' and firmly configured in nineteenth-century nationalism, scientific racism, and imperialism, that, in turn, and not so paradoxically, provided the tools and language for the colonial project of Zionism. In other words, it is a dark, tangled, and profoundly European and Occidental story. Yet, in a further colonial twist, it is the Arabs, and the Palestinians in particular, who have been forced to live with its murderous consequences.

It is at this point that the Western sense of guilt for the Holocaust needs revisiting. Of course, many historians and critical thinkers, Jewish and non, have been doing this for decades. The historical and crucial details are readily available. What I would simply like to point to, and this brings up yet again the centrality of critical Jewish thought to modernity, is Sigmund Freud's insistence that the trauma of the repression, which in this case would be the refusal to work through the Shoah to register the colonial constitution of the present, means we are destined to remain in a stalled situation (Freud, 2005). Blocked in our narcissism, unwilling not simply to signal but also to elaborate on the loss of murdered millions, both in the European death camps and the

colonial killing fields, and work through the necessary mourning, we are left, as Paul Gilroy rightly pointed out some time ago, in a state of melancholy (Gilroy, 2004).

To insist on the connections that apparently cannot be named and to escape the repression that binds us to a past seemingly emptied of all significance except the history that confirms our sovereignty on the present (and the future) suggests that guilt can only be a point of departure, not arrival. Once duly acknowledged, there is the need for a reply and a responsibility. To take up that critical and political burden means not only refusing the idea that antisemitism has somehow been resolved by being dispatched to the citadel of an ethnonationalist state in the eastern Mediterranean and the Middle East. It means, above all, returning to the West its direct responsibility for the ongoing genocide of Gaza and the reign of terror in the West Bank. As much of the rest of the world has understood, it is not simply Israel on historical trial but the whole edifice of the Occident.

Black holes and the whites of their eyes

The way Western television and newspapers report on the ongoing massacre in Gaza, the ethnic cleansing and genocidal intent of Israel, brings to the fore what Stuart Hall wrote over forty years ago about the structural racism of the British media (Hall, 2021). For the Jamaican intellectual, racism could not be reduced to an individual pathology but had to be seen as a power structure that was ‘naturalised’ into a common sense that organises the world for the benefit of some and to the detriment of others.

One of the key strategies for representing one’s enemy is to dehumanise them. This reduces the other to an animal state destined for anonymous annihilation. This strategy was not invented by Israel today. As with all colonial enterprises, it has been part of its political and military lexicon for decades. The Western media’s adoption of the Israeli state-sponsored narrative inadvertently reveals the racism that structures power throughout the West. The concepts of balance, neutrality, and critical distance evaporate in the ideological whirlwind. Claims of impartiality are lost in the storm of blatant partisanship, history is eradicated, and time is condensed into the question, “Do you condemn Hamas?”. Palestinians remain voiceless, reduced to dead and mutilated bodies. At best, the natives are victims, never protagonists with their version of events. Alongside the apparent comparisons between Ukraine and Palestine, where

one is supported and speaks, and the other abandoned and silenced, the colour line touches the heart of the political economy of images and narratives that expose the ethical hypocrisy of Western democracy.

To insist that what is happening in the eastern Mediterranean, in a tiny strip of land clinging to the Mediterranean, is much more than a local conflict or geopolitical event is to emphasise that Palestine is 'the' issue of our time. Discussions of anti-Semitism and the Shoah revolving around Israel and the continued justification of colonial warfare against the native Palestinians necessarily lead us into the dark archives of the West. To speak of the constancy of anti-Semitism, of Western (and not only German) responsibility for the Holocaust, of racism and Islamophobia today, is to speak of the racist configuration of our culture.

Centuries of anti-Semitism have certainly not been solved by unconditional support for the state of Israel, nor by transferring fear of the other from the Jew to the Muslim. The narrative reveals all its limitations by shielding itself with a rationalism that seems to find confirmation only in Western institutions of power. Students beaten and arrested by the police for protesting against the genocide in Gaza that is live-streamed worldwide is only the most acute expression of the moral bankruptcy of the West. What is emerging is a growing public divergence within Western society between popular sentiments and the political institutions that should represent them. Today, talking about Palestine in Western societies means talking about democracy.

A fear of history asserts itself. There is an ongoing attempt to erase the past and annihilate memory, be it the Israeli destruction of all cultural institutions in Gaza or the European obfuscation of its colonial constitution. The threat that the past can interrogate us is desperately avoided. Other histories, subaltern, marginalised, and not necessarily authorised by the West but intrinsic to its formation, challenge the omnipotence of our 'white eyes', as Stuart Hall put it. They produce black holes, concentrated accumulations of historical and cultural energy destined to damage the existing narrative and invade the retina with other historical truths.

Beyond the law towards justice

On 26 March 2024, at the 55th session of the Human Rights Council in Geneva, Francesca Albanese, Special Rapporteur on the human rights situation in the Palestinian Territories occupied since 1967, presented her report entitled ‘Anatomy of a Genocide’. Chilling and irrefutable evidence was presented that Israel flouts international law and ignores the terms of the UN Convention on Genocide. This, along with the continued support of most Western governments for Israel’s ongoing slaughter in Gaza, underlines the growing gap between the West’s universal claims and the planetary framing of the issue of justice. While the former seeks to continue colonial management in pursuit of its own economic and geopolitical interests, the latter inevitably exposes its increasingly moribund rhetoric’s cracks, fractures, and blatant brutality. All of this means taking a critical step beyond practised parameters.

At this point, as in the case brought by South Africa against the State of Israel in the International Court of Justice earlier this year, the rule of law rotates 180° from the punitive preservation of the status quo, often protecting an unjust distribution of power and denial of rights, to promoting the horizon of hope of a justice to come. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak proposed, reiterating and expanding on Jacques Derrida’s idea of justice as an ‘experience of the impossible’, the need to imagine perspectives not necessarily inscribed in the existing legal statute book (Spivak, 1999). An exercise in political imagination becomes a matter of insisting on humanity’s reception of the ongoing and yet-to-be-realized possibilities in the world. As Jean-Paul Sartre (1961) wrote many decades ago in his Preface to Frantz Fanon’s *The Damned of the Earth*, this is the laying bare of our humanism that simultaneously opens up the challenge of a postcolonial world. For the ‘postcolonial’ does not represent the simple overthrow of the previous political tutelage of the West but rather inaugurates a deeper appreciation of the violent constitution of the present, shattering the teleology of linear progress now that the still repressed colonial past comes to meet us from the future.

That is why, in the genocide Israel is perpetuating in Gaza, we are not only witnessing the continuation of a century-long colonial war. In its anachronism, the State of Israel, born and fostered by European colonialism in the 19th century and promoted by the British Empire, and then most dramatically sealed by the extermination of six million European Jews (along with Sinti, Roma, homosexuals and disabled people) in the

Holocaust, continues to reveal its colonial formation. Israel's settler colonialism and its continual pressures to eliminate the natives are then reinforced by Western support that effectively insists that Palestinians should bear the burden of European atrocities and related guilt.

To insist that Palestinians are entitled to rights and to confront the blockage of that demand by accusations of anti-Semitism is to open this colonial wound and lay bare our history in a manner that shatters Western conclusions. Hence, there is anger and rage in denial, political stupidity, and the historical ignorance accompanying complacent certainty. The ultimate failure of Western claims on the world had already been grasped in Hannah Arendt's precise analysis of statelessness and those not entitled to rights over seventy years ago (Arendt, 2017). Rights are reduced to membership of a state and its citizenship. Those who do not have a state, e.g. the Palestinians, the Kurds, and the list goes on, are without rights and outside legal protection. This is why Arendt insisted on the need not to form a state based on a single nationality or religion, which would lead to the inevitable creation of statelessness.

But the Palestinians exist, resist, and persist. In their stateless, often diasporic status, they constitute, like the so-called 'illegal' migrants crossing the Mediterranean, the Balkans, and the English Channel, a challenge and a critique of the modern nation-state. In their detachment from Zionism, some Jewish thinkers such as Judith Butler (2012) and Daniel Boyarin (2023) point to diasporic politics to rescue Judaism from the mortal vice of the violent preservation of a homogeneous Jewish state that the Sephardic Primo Levi was already distancing himself from more than forty years ago (Levi and Camon, 1989). In the heart of European-derived law, the West's moral claims and political authority are being questioned and judged insufficient. Its supposed anchorage in a uniform nationalism is refuted. Exposed to the histories it continually denies, the centre cannot contain its diasporic progeny and emerging imaginaries; its universalism now snarls up in truncated parodies as the law insists on a justice yet to come.

If the university reproduces colonial violence

While the university approves, the students rightly protest about educational and research relations with Israel. Collaborations in the scientific field often find an outlet in military practices. Even the more abstract humanities are embedded in the fabric of a society that operates as a colonial power in the Middle East. This entanglement is well explained by the Israeli scholar Maya Wind in her volume *Towers of Ivory and Steel: How Israeli Universities Deny Palestinian Freedom* (2024).

Meanwhile, Israel continues to feel threatened despite being one of the world's leading military powers. It still claims to be the victim. Much of this has to do with a colonial reality in which both the colonised and the coloniser experience that all their relationships are sustained by violence. Supporting the party that continues its colonial rule offers no solution to the colonised, but neither does it provide a solution for the coloniser who is destined to live in a state of exception of war and a completely militarised social life. In both cases, one is well beyond the parameters of a democracy that promotes rights for all under its tutelage.

A critical perspective would insist on democratic political reasoning rather than a geopolitical logic that seeks to justify the existing power relations. This requires Europe to take full responsibility for the tragedy it has caused in the Middle East, while Israel needs to reconfigure itself in response to everyone under its rule. To think with and through the Shoah, it is necessary to begin to think in these terms.

The preconditions for a democratic state in that strip of land are already in Tel Aviv's hands. The Palestinian Arab, Muslim, and Christian population is already embedded in the state apparatuses of its direct and indirect control, from the river to the sea. The political question is how to transform the facts on the ground from the current colonial violence into a post-colonial elaboration articulated through perspectives of justice. It seems that Europe, which continues in all economic and cultural spheres to support the current state of Israel, is sustaining a historical failure that goes against its claims to democracy. It is unveiling, once again, the same racial device that had justified its planetary colonialism. The preservation of democracy is limited to an ethnonational membership of a society of ex-Europeans that, it seems, is worth more than the

demands for freedom of the indigenous Arabs. Which, of course, is the basis of racist apartheid.

The national and European institutions called upon to deliberate on relations with the State of Israel should here reflect more deeply along historical and ethical lines. To build a path capable of mediating between Europe's atrocious past dumped in the Middle East, universities and research institutes have, at the very least, the critical task of sustaining an opening capable of breaking away from the current configuration of power/knowledge. They are responsible for sustaining future democratic horizons for all, not just for some. If the modern university is the place for analytical confrontation, innovative research and agonistic discussion, it cannot propose the mere reproduction of the existing status quo without losing its own critical purpose and historical mission.

The students know: decolonising research

Perhaps, faced with a rogue state pursuing ethnic cleansing with intent to genocide and that refuses international law and considers itself above the rulings of the United Nations, it is time to speak seriously about how directly to confront Israel. If it is of the modern, democratic West, as it claims, it needs severe reform or otherwise boycotting. And if the question is not simply to be dominated by geopolitics, it requires an ethical and democratic response. Let us be clear. Zionism as an explicitly colonial enterprise, and its founders had no qualms in acknowledging it, cannot be democratic in its intentions. The protection of its ethnocratic rule requires racial purity and apartheid, now embodied in its legal apparatus and constitution. The opposition to this criticism of Israel, invariably labelled antisemitism, is itself an assault on democracy and the pursuit of historical justice.

Right now, Zionist ideology and its military occupation of Palestine are, as in all settler colonialisms, pursuing the elimination of the natives, just as previously in the anglophone imperium of North America, Australia, and South Africa. The violent formation of Occidental polities and identities produces silenced histories and forgotten geographies. Nevertheless, as the Palestinians teach us, these histories resist and persist. At the University Orientale in Naples on April 23, 2024, there was a significant seminar on "Israel, the arms industry and the role of the University". Among the important contributions was the presentation by the Israeli academic Nurit

Peled-Elhanan on the symbolic genocide of Palestinians in Israeli school books (Peled-Elhanan, 2013). In these texts, vetted and approved by the Israeli Ministry of Education, there are no individual Palestinians, only an anonymous, dehumanised category referred to as Arabs. There are no scientists, artists, academics, or politicians amongst the Palestinians, simply an ethnically distinct group who threaten Israeli life with their underdevelopment and terrorism: the enemy of modern Israel and the Occidental Zionist project of promoting civilisation. This pedagogical semiotics, as Nurit Peled-Elhanan illustrated in detail, is central to the racialising mechanisms of an apartheid state, its fascist education (her words), and its military rule of the colonised. Speaking truth to power in this manner has a price. Nurit Peled-Elhanan has recently been suspended from her university post. These days, Israeli universities explicitly declare themselves Zionist. They insist that their role is to defend Zionism and the narrative of the ethnonational state; so much for scientificity and academic neutrality.

This narrative is not confined to a small but very powerful state in the eastern Mediterranean. It has been adopted for decades throughout the West. It has been historically cultivated ever since the initial mappings of the world in the early nineteenth century, overwhelmingly by imperial London. What the Harvard-trained Palestinian intellectual Edward Said, who taught at Columbia, more recently dubbed Orientalism, has sedimented in the common sense of political and cultural pronouncements in Europe and North America: from the White House to the TV studio and newspaper article. To argue against this configuration of 'knowledge' and its management of the globe is inevitably to be engaged in an argument with our society and the making of ourselves. As James Baldwin sharply put it: 'Precisely at the point when you begin to develop a conscience, you must find yourself at war with your society' (Baldwin, 2021: 337). I like to think this is a neat summary of all critical work and analysis. It is also where the unthinkable links between the death camp of Gaza and the juridical execution of migrants in the Mediterranean need to be made as the liberal smokescreen evaporates and we witness the brutal exercise of naked power.

The conclusion is that Occidental institutions, government entities, research agencies, universities, and the more obvious participation of arms manufacturers, technological companies, and financial servicing are part and parcel of a colonial apparatus. If the transformation of conflict into capital is one thing, politically supported by the pursuit

of economic prosperity and ‘progress’, its critical analysis is altogether another. Students, initially on American campuses and increasingly elsewhere, rightly teach their teachers and administrators this latter perspective. To evoke Hannah Arendt (2018), they are pulling out of the teeth of official history and the supine response to the status quo an altogether more honest and democratic narrative of the human condition.

West of Gaza

To speak of democracy, rights and justice in the shadow of Palestine, Israel, and the genocide in Gaza is to register the very limits of the historical spaces and political practices that these concepts should promote and embody. The language of the West – its government, its media and its politics – has been exposed in Gaza and is sorely lacking. A humanitarian problem is identified at most, but never a genuinely political one. The former is separate and distant from our daily lives, the latter directly affects us; the former calls for momentary and superficial help, the latter for profound change. Palestine questions us.

We must make connections that have been invariably blocked, rejected, and censored to defend the indefensible. Through the prism of the obscene violence unfolding in Gaza, we are exposed to a far broader and deeper discussion of the history, rights and justice of the global order.

In particular, we confront the intertwining of the colonial constitution of Western modernity and the Shoah. Zionism, even in its more ‘socialist’ historical forms, was and remains settlement colonialism that has continually sought the physical and symbolic annihilation of Palestinians, their history, culture and voices. This has been accompanied by the institutional memorialisation of the Holocaust, transformed into a moral event masking Western responsibility in the historical processes that led to its realisation. It would involve, as Aimé Césaire (2001) and Hannah Arendt (2017) insisted, considering the colonial practices that returned to Europe in the racial identification that led to extermination. The subsequent shift of European responsibility for the Shoah onto the Arab world, through unconditional support for the state of Israel and the imposition on the Palestinians of the burden of carrying Western guilt, is the further unravelling of this colonial genealogy. The knot between Zionism, which betrays its ideology of racial supremacy every day, and Western

colonialism, emerges today in the impending fascism of Israel that Primo Levi already sensed 40 years ago and which now haunts the present (Levi and Camon 1989).

Almost like a crease in time, the potent nineteenth-century mixture of imperialism, scientific racism, fervent nationalism and... Zionism, seeking with its universal claims to 'civilise' the planet while imposing ideas of homogeneous national unity at home, continues to cast its heart of darkness deep into the present, whether in the permitted slaughter of Palestinians or the legal execution of 'illegal' migrants. In the political economy of our 'progress', the lives that matter least are discarded: sent to Native American reservations, to immigrant identification, surveillance and deportation camps, to the world's largest open-air prison that is Palestine, and to the ghettos of western cities. We face the reality that modernity is a colonising and, when necessary, genocidal enterprise. Listening to Israeli historian Ilan Pappé, who insists on the trajectory of colonial regimes and the imminent implosion of Israel, urges us to return to these histories to free ourselves for a more democratic future (Pappé, 2023). Staring into the atrocity of the abyss, its colonialism, the Holocaust and Gaza, we discover that we are ourselves Israel/Palestine.

The structural violence of colonialism, explained so well by Fanon, affects the colonised and the coloniser both physically and psychologically. It erases the innocence of both. In resisting brutal imposition and the malevolent exercise of asymmetrical powers, Hamas is a symptomatic response, not a source. If it were to disappear tomorrow, another name for organised resistance would take its place. It is inevitably labelled as terrorism by those who control the defining mechanisms. As in the slave revolts in the Caribbean, when white masters were massacred, moral repugnance cannot hide political understanding and, dare we say it, even historical justification. Perhaps, rather than responding to the media cry of "Do you condemn Hamas?", an organisation that is undoubtedly fundamentalist and authoritarian (like all militarised anti-colonial agencies: from the Algerian FLN to the Vietcong), we must ask why Hamas emerged and what it responds to historically and structurally. Understanding the terrible ambivalence of the term in historical liberation movements makes the violent prison explosion against the military occupation on 7 October 2023 difficult to condemn.

As the Afro-Brazilian philosopher Denise Ferreira da Silva suggests, it is here that the prevailing categories of modernity crumble (Ferreira da Silva, 2007). In their ruins, we can see Palestine as the question of our time. It is not simply a geopolitical or historical interrogation but an epistemological one. Those who have the right to narrate, define and explain the question (clearly not the Palestinians who remain essentially gagged) reveal a precise power-knowledge device in which our ‘objectivity’ always corresponds to the demands of our subjectivity. This, too, is colonialism, which, after all, sustains white supremacy. Thinking *with* Palestine poses us with something radically different. Only the precise political and historical question that Hannah Arendt would have posed shakes Western rhetoric and forces it into silence: Do the Palestinians have the right to have rights? Answering in the affirmative implies overcoming the current colonial situation and reconfiguring Israel in the territory’s complex historical, political and cultural heritage, which should become free for *all* its inhabitants from the river to the sea.

The desert of the West

Today, with the continuing support of Western democracies to the genocide being carried out by Israel in Gaza, along with the persistent daily violence in the West Bank, where does this leave us? In conclusion, I would insist that we draw upon deeper histories to shatter media and political obsessions with the present. Long before October 7 of last year, before Hamas or the PLO ever existed, or even before the Nakba of 1948, we encounter the Occident consistently peddling the bankruptcy of so-called Western values in the Middle East. This takes us back to the modern bedrock of the colonial pretensions of Europe clothed in commercial greed and religious ideology in the preceding centuries.

During the First World War, in the struggle for global hegemony, the British decided to open a front against Germany’s ally, the Ottoman Empire, in the deserts of Saudi Arabia and Syria. Then ruled from Istanbul, this swathe of territory stretching from Yemen and Mecca in the south to Damascus and Beirut in the north and from the Mediterranean to Iraq to the east was the centre of the Arab world. Further west, the Ottomans had already lost Egypt, Libya, Tunisia and Algeria to the British, Italians and French. The Arab world was encouraged by the British command in Egypt to revolt

with the promise of the creation of an Arab kingdom from the Red Sea to Damascus and from the Persian border to the Mediterranean. This new political entity included Palestine. What subsequently occurred was not simply about daring military exploits involving desert cavalry raids and Lawrence of Arabia riding into the Occidental imagination. It was about Arab nationalism.

In a series of correspondence in 1915 between Sir Henry McMahon in Cairo and Sharif Husain in Mecca, the terms and conditions of the revolt in the desert were explicitly elaborated and endorsed. The British government refused to make this correspondence public before 1939. It has been studied in its Arab version and can be consulted in English in the important 1938 volume recommended by Edward Said, *The Arab Awakening. The Story of the Arab National Movement* by the Lebanese historian and diplomat George Antonius.

But then, laid on top of this documented agreement was another that involved the British and French and their claims on the area. If British concerns for the passage to India and the protection of the Suez Canal were brutally pragmatic, French interests drew on older ties embedded in ideas of Christendom and the Crusades. The Sykes-Picot agreement for the carve-up of the 'Middle East' between Britain and France into mandated territories was secret. Then, in 1917, the British government, responding to Zionist pressure (and manipulative antisemitic sentiments in the British government) produced the Balfour Declaration, promising a homeland for the Jews in Palestine. Both the Sykes-Picot agreement and the Balfour Declaration were elaborated oblivious to, and in outright contradiction with, the initial promise that brought the Arab world into revolt and the subsequent dismantling of Turkish power in the region. Put simply, the Arabs were betrayed.

The proposed Arab kingdom was mandated by Britain and France and subsequently divided up into fledgling nation-states (Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, Syria...Israel) whose confines reflected European concerns, certainly not the political and cultural forces and relations that historically sustained the area. The latter dynamic was cynically squeezed into another map and political order.

One hundred years later, the Occidental settlement remains firmly in place. That past has not passed. Nor does it simply shadow the present. The very language employed,

whether referring to the ‘Middle East’, the ‘Arabs’, or the ethnic supremacist state of Israel as a ‘democracy’, betrays the ongoing colonial coordinates of its constitution. Of course, the actors and conditions have changed. Still, the insistence of that map of political power and its negation of indigenous rights – both directly in the case of Palestine or indirectly through the exercise of autocratic rule invariably supported by outside powers rewarding ‘stability’ – remain firmly in place.

What is most striking in this political picture is the absolute refusal of Occidental responsibility. Most obviously, there is the British government that, from the beginning, sought to cover its tracks by first abandoning the Arabs and then washing its hands of the Jewish question in Palestine. More recently, under American directives, Occidental military interventions have continued. Again, they have led to political mess-ups in the area (Iran, Iraq, Libya) accompanied by the constant proxy policing entrusted to Israel.

What does this mean? Are we to expect another revolt in the desert? This, of course, already occurred. In 2014, the Islamic State or ISIS, affiliated with al Qaeda, violently sought to redraw the cartography of the area. Another victim of the European map – the Kurds – was largely instrumental in halting their proposal. But behind intricate cultural forms and complex historical forces, it has been the West and its continuing colonial management of the Arab world that has produced the daily violence, terrorism and fundamentalism it so publicly denounces and fears. To continue on this course, as presently appears to be the case, is perhaps the true expression of Western values: colonial in purpose and, when necessary, genocidal in practice.

References

- Antonius, G. (2019) *The Arab Awakening. The Story of the Arab National Movement*. London: Forgotten Books.
- Arendt, H. (2017) *The Origins of Totalitarianism*. London: Penguin.
- Arendt, H. (2018) *The Human Condition*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Arendt, H. (2022) *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil*. London: Penguin.
- Barat, F. (2024) ‘Angela Davis: South Africa standing up for Palestine has created new hope in the world’ *Mondoweiss*. Available at: <https://mondoweiss.net/2024/02/>

[angela-davis-south-africa-standing-up-for-palestine-has-created-new-hope-in-the-world/](#)

- Baldwin, J. (1966) 'A Report from Occupied Territory'. *The Nation*, July 11. Available at: <https://www.thenation.com/article/culture/report-occupied-territory/>
- Baldwin, J. (2021) *The Price of the Ticket*. Boston: Beacon Press.
- Bauman, Z. (1991) *Modernity and the Holocaust*. Cambridge: Polity
- Boyarin, D. (2023) *The No-State Solution: A Jewish Manifesto*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Butler, J. (2012) *Parting Ways: Jewishness and the Critique of Zionism*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Césaire, A. (2001) *Discourse on Colonialism*, trans. Joan Pinkham. New York: Monthly Review Press.
- Djebar, A. (1999) *Women of Algiers in their Apartment*, trans. Marjolin de Jager. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press.
- Fanon, F. (2021) *The Wretched of the Earth*, trans. Richard Philcox. London: Black Cat.
- Ferreira da Silva, D. (2007) *Towards a Global Idea of Race*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Freud, S. (2005) *On Murder, Mourning and Melancholia*. London: Penguin.
- Gilroy, P. (2004) *After Empire: Melancholia or Convivial Culture?* London: Routledge.
- Hall, S. (2021) 'Whites of Their Eyes: Racist Ideologies and the Media', in Stuart Hall, *Selected Writings on Race and Difference*, edited by Paul Gilroy and Ruth Wilson Gilmore. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Levi, P. And Camon, F. (1989) *Conversations with Primo Levi*, trans. J. Shepley. Evanston: Northwestern University Press.
- Memmi, A. (2021) *The Colonizer and the Colonized*, trans. Howard Greenfield. London: Profile Books.
- Pappé, I. (2023), 'We are witnessing the beginning of the end'. *Middle East Eye*. Available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cB2_wgUd8Os
- Peled-Elhanan, N. (2013) *Palestine in Israeli School Books: Ideology and Propaganda in Education*. London: I.B. Tauris.
- Said, E. (2003) *Orientalism*. London: Penguin.
- Sartre, J-P. (1961) 'Préface' in Frantz Fanon, *Les damnés de la terre*. Paris: Maspero.

- Spivak, G.C. (1999) *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason: Towards a History of the Vanishing Present*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Wind, M. (2024) *Towers of Ivory and Steel. How Israeli Universities Deny Palestinian Freedom*. London: Verso Books.
- Wynter, S. (2003) 'Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom: Towards the Human, After Man, Its Overrepresentation-An Argument', *CR: The New Centennial Review* 3: 3 (Fall 2003): 257–337.

Iain Chambers is a writer and independent scholar. He previously taught Cultural, Postcolonial, and Mediterranean Studies at the Oriental University in Naples, where he coordinated the doctoral program in Cultural and Postcolonial Studies in the Anglophone world and directed the Centre for Postcolonial and Gender Studies. He researches migration, music and identity in the Mediterranean. He is a member of the editorial boards of the journals *New Formations*, *Third Text*, *Journal of Mediterranean Studies*, and *Postcolonial Studies*, and the author, inter alia, of the books *Mediterranean Crossings: The Politics of an Interrupted Modernity* (Duke University Press, 2008), *Postcolonial Interruptions, Unauthorised Modernities* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2017), and the forthcoming *The Mediterranean Question* (with Marta Cariello).

Email: i.chambers@icloud.com