

Thinking after Gaza

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I. THE LANGUAGE OF SILENCE

Around the death, destruction and disappearance of Gaza lies the silence of a desecrated cemetery. What do I mean by that? Gaza is certainly not silent. There is the constant buzz of the military drones, the ominous clanking of the treads of the tanks and their growling diesel engines, the militarised bulldozers eradicating buildings, outbursts of gunfire, sniper bullets, the whine of falling bombs and missiles, the screams of the grieving and the dying. Sounds of annihilation and... resistance. And yet amongst us there is a critical silence as discussion insists on conserving the established narrative where Palestinian resistance is the operation of terrorists and Israel is always the victim. There is an unwillingness to open analysis to another, more complicated, telling, further voices and unplanned encounters that break the mirror of our deadly convictions. And what is silenced here through excluding a hearing of the historical archives is the ethical imperative of taking the world we have inherited

into ~~ethical~~ custody and care. The moral compass, however illusory its bearings, is broken. What is considered “Western civilisation” is adrift on a sea of troubles.

Since October 2023, probably over 100,000 (and the figure is almost certainly higher) of Gaza’s inhabitants have died in its few square kilometres. The survivors are being starved to death. This apocalyptic scenario is accompanied by the violence of institutional silence. There is much self-serving chatter, but little more than a handful of legal scholars, UN officials and reports seeking to impose a discarded order. The Israeli government forbids all foreign journalists from entering the Strip while it annihilates their Palestinian colleagues. The censorship is total. Meanwhile, public outrage in Occidental countries mounts, despite “anti-terrorism” laws deployed to squash any form of dissent, and some governments tepidly revive the idea of a Palestinian state when it is now safely rendered obsolete by the facts on the ground. An ineffectual hand-wringing that is, anyway, all too little and too late.

The brutal exercise of state violence and geopolitical pragmatism takes command. History is shown the back door. Enemies are identified, loyalties extorted, and we are all expected to approve the dichotomies deployed to explain the world, to justify rearmament, and to defend the West against the “barbarians”. In this assembly, we might more cynically suggest that perhaps the stakes are altogether less about moral values and liberal illusions of “civilisation”, and altogether more about the centrality of colonialism and the racist structures of power motoring the reproductive machinery of capital. And capital knows no morality. Its logic of accumulation refuses boundaries and ethical restrictions. Ultimately, it has no ideological intent except its own reproduction, no matter the cost in social, human and natural resources. Genocide and ecocide are equally part of the calculus of the existing normative order. And here perhaps we also need to remind ourselves that the colonial logic exposed in all its obscene violence in the eastern Mediterranean is intrinsic to the legal and military logic applied in the political management and rejection of migrants elsewhere, throughout the Mediterranean, in the Balkans, and across Europe and the USA. The goal is common: to defend a particular historical bloc and to keep the world under Western and white hegemony. It is where, most tellingly, racial profiling, deportation and ethnic cleansing mesh most directly in the brutal administration of the present.

After almost two years of colonial massacre words fail and language falters. Justified as self-defence, the latter actually being a right that should apply to the Palestinians and Hamas, certainly not to the occupying military power, legal redress is seemingly inoperative. The limits of law have been overrun. Moral authority, juridical accountability, and universal values are in tatters. So, to continue to speak of Gaza, as we surely must, comes round to speaking of the

coordinates and conditions that have permitted this public atrocity to be both committed and institutionally endorsed.

Simply put, our language has been occupied. How to resist this occupation, contest the colonisation of words and the capture of representation, by an increasingly vicious authoritarianism? And while some terms are entirely excluded from public consideration – colonialism and anti-colonial resistance – others, such as post-colonialism, decolonisation and anti-racism, have often been institutionally incorporated in academic and art discourses in a manner that robs them of historical and political consequences¹. How to challenge this state of affairs, contest the ownership of language and puncture its administrative closure? How do we return to inhabit a language that is not restricted simply to mirroring the status quo?

If we are unable to respond to Gaza in the immediacy of the analytical rhetoric provided by public politics and institutional agendas then the unstable insistency of historical spacetime that refuses to pass, that uncontrollably returns to haunt the present, that ghosts the instrumental confidence of conclusive rationalities with unanswered questions, with interruptions, takes us in to an altogether different semantics and critical grammar.

Here, history comes spilling out of the past into the present – the maps of existing explanation buckle under the weight of this unwelcome intrusion. The role of empire and imperial rule, of settler colonialism, ethnic supremacies and racism, returns in the ongoing formation of the present. Everyone has heard of the aerial destruction of Guernica in 1937. Still, virtually nobody has heard of the similar fate meted out earlier in the French Rif war to the Moroccan town of Chefchaouen in 1925 by a squadron of mercenary US pilots led by Charles Sweeny. Sweeny explained his involvement: “In our view, France, in fighting Abdel Krim, is fighting the cause of the white man’s civilization, and all who have formed this squadron know enough of the world to appreciate what the white man’s civilization means”². Only when colonial practices – genocide, the deliberate bombing of civilians (inaugurated by Italy in Libya in 1911), the systematic destruction of civil and cultural life – are transferred to European soil and its own populations, are they allowed to become significant.

In what Rashid Khalidi has described as The Hundred Years War on Palestine, we again encounter Europe’s heart of darkness³. The seemingly neutral

1 A. Scafe-Smith, S. Scafe-Smith, *Speak of the Devil: Reflections on the Institutional Co-optation of Language*, in “The Funambulist”, n. 58, March-April 2025.

2 D. McCormick, *One Man’s Wars. The Story of Charles Sweeny, Soldier of Fortune*, Barker, London 1972. Quoted here: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Charles_Sweeny. See also, S. Lindqvist, *History of Bombing*, Granta Books, London 2001.

3 R. Khalidi, *The Hundred Years War on Palestine. A History of Settler Colonial Conquest and Resistance*, Profile Books, London 2020.

geographical term the “Middle East” betrays the brutal framing of Palestine in agendas drawn up in London and Paris, and now directed by the USA. Its colonisation by white, European migrants, sustained by the British Empire – initially as an anti-Semitic and colonial solution to the “Jewish question” – and subsequently sealed in atonement for centuries of European antisemitism culminating in the Holocaust, exposes all the brutal limits of this political settlement in which the Palestinians and the Arab world were not permitted a role.

II. THE BEGINNING OF THINKING

Thinking with Gaza as a hole in our language, we are left speechless. We seem to have been struck dumb by the irrefutable truth of a genocide approved and sustained by our governments and institutional culture. In this dark tunnel, how do we respond to the cut in the fabric of Occidental humanism that has sustained and justified the exercise of our knowledge and politics in the world? Perhaps it is now a matter, to twist one of Martin Heidegger’s late formulations, of registering the end of philosophy, understood as logos, law and reasoned authority, and the beginnings of thinking as an altogether less guaranteed passage and way in the world.

The presumed pronouncement by Theodor Adorno that poetry after Auschwitz was impossible (although he never actually used that phrase: he suggested that to write poetry after the Shoah would be barbarism – a phrase he later retracted), could today be brought to bear on Gaza as critical thinking falls silent⁴. But it should be noted that even before the latest stage in the Zionist project to exercise genocide and the ethnic cleansing of Palestine, Western critical thinking had very little to say. On Palestine and the colonial present, it is a matter of recording the limits of a certain rationality and the increasingly pathetic inheritance of the Enlightenment. To make the point, it means to insist on a cesura. Of course, nothing has been cancelled. At most, we can say, such a tradition exists under the sign of erasure. It now confronts the dimensions it has historically marginalised and structurally excluded: gender, race and colonialism. Its epistemic violence is rendered explicit, naked.

Perhaps, I, too, have little to say, except to record the silence that accompanies mourning. But mourning for what and for whom? For the Palestinians sacrificed on the altar of European guilt for the Shoah? Certainly. No one explains why the

4 J. Schimdt, *Poetry After Auschwitz – What Adorno Didn’t Say*: <https://persistentenlightenment.com/2013/05/21/poetry-after-auschwitz-what-adorno-didnt-say/>

Palestinians should bear that burden. And then, in a *doppelgänger* that echoes the colonial logic that brought genocidal practices to modern Europe with the Shoah, it has been returned through the Zionist state to the colonised population of Palestine. This recursive logic invites us to think that genocide, and the racism that justifies it, is not a transitory event, a kind of madness promoted in a combinatorial concatenation, but rather an ever-present and essential part of the banal machinery of power called the West, called modernity. (We easily forget that historically for most of the world modernity has simply meant one thing: colonialism.) If this is the case, then we cannot return to normality, since this is not an aberration to be cancelled or a pathology to be cured, but a fundamental characteristic. If, in the face of the genocide in Gaza, critical thinking has largely failed, and not only and most obviously in contemporary Germany, we must also note the end of Western claims, both moral and intellectual, on the world. If the claimed universality of our knowledge and ethics has proven to be a fallacy, the coloniality of Occidental power under the aegis of capital now only continues in its most brutal form, that is, shamelessly nakedly, presenting itself in the immediate violence of power as right. So, perhaps, there is also the mourning subsequent to the burning of illusions, and the sombre realisation that a world we thought we owned and could explain has been reduced to ashes.

III. THE RETRACTION

At this point, what is our role as intellectuals, academics, journalists, artists, educators and citizens? Clearly, silence is complicity. It also represents the disintegration of critical faculties. So, in what one of my contacts in Palestine, Mazin Qumsiyeh, contesting exclusive claims on language, calls a holocaust, how can we speak in this scorched landscape?⁵

Occidental perceptions of universality fall away, go up in smoke under the bombs, become an empty husk among the bodies of induced famine. Gaza is not simply a tragedy played out on a narrow strip of land in the eastern Mediterranean, directly and indirectly occupied for decades by Israel. In the drama of ethnic cleansing and physical destruction taking place just a few hours' flight away from southern Europe and its Mediterranean coast, the deep structure of the colonial constitution of the West is fully exposed. Opposed to the critical distance and discursive neutrality of the historian, sociologist and political scientist, we have to learn to inhabit the discomfort (Sherene Seikaly) that accompanies the intellectual rigour of recognising a world that does not

⁵ <https://popular-resistance.blogspot.com/>

respond to our perspectives; a world that interrogates us in its refusal to confirm our narratives and language⁶. In turn, this renders the idea and practices of scholarship deeply problematic as we face the friction between the exercise of academic training and the challenge of the critical rigour engaged in complexities that are irreducible to disciplinary protocols. While not meaning the end of scholarship and their disciplines (the academic machinery would never permit it), it does imply an altogether more hesitant and sceptical voice that accompanies the retraction from an abstract universal self-assurance, which, after all, is a colonial habit. Any universalism that really seeks the measure of the world (Aimé Césaire) involves an inevitable undoing of our Occidental pretensions.



In other words, we are not simply faced with the violent exercise of military power, the brutal pragmatism of contemporary geopolitics, and the necropolitical rapacity of capital. What emerges from the ruins of Gaza, apart from the end of the West's moral claims on the world, is the stark announcement of what

6 Sherene Seikaly in conversation with Michael Rothberg, Per Leo and Willibald Steinmetz in the Colloquium *Between Past and Present: The Politics of Memory*, Wissenschaftskolleg zu Berlin, June 25, 2025: <https://www.wiko-berlin.de/en/wikothèque/multimedia/between-past-and-present-the-politics-of-memory>

has come to be known as racial capitalism⁷. Some lives clearly matter more than others. Some have the right to a name, others remain anonymous. Having the right to a name also means having the right to narrate. There is no need to compile statistics on this point. The right to narrate is distributed in a distinctively unequal manner. We are not equal. Beyond this sociological truism, the question arises as to whether this situation also impacts the production of our knowledge – historical, anthropological, sociological, political, philosophical – whatever it may be. Is the critical distance that guarantees “neutrality”, which in turn supports the claims of the “universal” and “scientific” validity of our thoughts and perspectives, perhaps a myth? In the genocide in Gaza, we see no critical distance or neutrality. What we have experienced has been a war of words, of punitive legal surveillance, of institutional obstruction, deliberate historical amnesia, academic evasiveness and public repression, seeking to preserve a particular narrative and block and reject others. The silence of so many centres of knowledge – universities, the media, museums, Holocaust organisations – together with so many intellectuals in the face of Gaza is an implicit recognition of this state of affairs. In the rubble, we must seek other beginnings; or rather, and changing the register, we must listen and see how others, altogether less tied to representing the institutions and languages of the West, are doing.

History did not begin on October 7, 2023. If the grammar of understanding were not so stunted and fundamentally oblivious to Palestinian rights, then the barest awareness of anti-colonial resistance would have located the brutal break-out of Hamas from the concentration camp of Gaza in a genealogy of colonial violence and resistance that included the FLN in Algeria, Frelimo in Mozambique, the ANC in South Africa, the Vietcong... In all the coverage and discussion of what occurred, the unwillingness to acknowledge the *history of Palestine* is striking. The term “terrorism”, deployed as a political and media cudgel, veiled any need to analyse and explain.

In his brilliant 1966 film *The Battle of Algiers*, the Italian director Gillo Pontecorvo illustrated the components so well. In strikingly Fanonian terms, the matrix of brutal oppression that holds the colonial world in its grip, and can only lead to violent responses in order to liberate itself, is starkly portrayed. The systematic torture and dehumanisation of those who contest European colonial rule leads, in a situation of asymmetrical powers, to resistance have to adopt armed resistance and what we lazily like to call terrorism. There is a vital connection between French colonial rule in Algiers and the concerted effort of Occidental governments today to suppress any public discussion of Palestinian

7 C. Robinson, *Black Marxism. The Making of the Black Radical Tradition*, London, Zed Books 1983.

rights. In both cases, the indigenous are not permitted a voice, are not allowed to have rights. If anti-colonialism and the right to self-determination are simply to be considered terrorism, what is this democracy that juridically and politically deploys such a term to control, limit, deny and define public protest over Gaza as a crime? Meanwhile, the West's overt protection and unremitting support of the settler colony of Israel is burning down the house of international law⁸. Human rights are seemingly only reserved for some. This, too, is racism. It will have consequences.

IV. THE RIGHT TO A PAST

Today, the historical horror of the Holocaust has become a totemic presence (especially, but not only, in Germany) that guarantees the moral authority of those – Israel, Germany, the West – that seek to defend its uniqueness at all costs. So, no colonial antecedents of genocide are contemplated, or considerations of the racial structures of power, and the combination of both in the constitution of Occidental modernity, are permitted to participate in the discussion. As a fetish, the rest of the world is sacrificed on its altar. The purported universalism of “never again”, turns out to be an altogether more limited affair: Occidental and ultimately left in the custody of the state of Israel. Moral authority is transformed into a geopolitical tool that justifies any action that insures and extends the political economy of the status quo. The hysterical defence of German identity through the unconditional support of Israel, and the Occidental refusal to condemn the genocide in Gaza, is the flip side of the ethnic cleansing and annexation of the West Bank by the Zionist colonial state. In both cases, as Manuel Schwab perceptively argues, this totemic force welds together anxiously avoided and unsavoury material – the colonial constitution of Occidental modernity, Germany's repudiated Nazi past, the militarised colonial formation of Israel – into “the collective belonging to the foundational violence wielded to forget it”⁹. The symbolic authority of the state then transforms moral doubt and historical accountability into a unrelentless vigilance against others – Arabs, Turks, Muslims... Palestinians. It practises racialised violence against those who fall outside the historical pact of Occidental liberalism, while consistently denying such violence in order to secure its universalist claims. Which, at the end of the day, and coming virulently to the forefront right now, uncovers the

8 M. Hasan: <https://www.aljazeera.com/video/quotable/2025/8/4/western-states-has-burned-down-international-order-over-israels-war#flips-6376538497112:0>

9 M. Schwab, *Gaza, Germany, and the Post-Perpetrator Unconscious: Ozymandias at The Hague*, in “Journal of Genocide Research”, 2025, p. 9.

murderous propensity of the project of the modern nation-state. In resisting such damning conditions, we catch the glimmer of considerations of a post-state perspective on Palestinian belonging in an exilic home, sustained in diasporic conditions and provisional freedoms, without the stamp of Occidental approval, intimated in different ways by Hannah Arendt and Edward Said and today proposed, for example, by Sophia Azeb¹⁰. Which, ironically, is what Jewish people outside of Zionism have also taught us.

Perhaps this discussion helps us to begin to respond to the question recently posed by the Israeli historian Amos Goldberg of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem: “what is the meaning of Holocaust memory in a reality where Israel, and most of the West, especially the US and Germany – countries that have made Holocaust memory a central component of their identities and a moral imperative for the world – is committing genocide?”¹¹ As Goldberg goes on to argue, using the Holocaust as the benchmark for modern liberal democracy and human rights means we are today living its complete failure and breakdown. And in that break-up, the guiding idea of the rights of Israel as the home of Holocaust survivors and its existence as necessary “compensation” for Europe’s crime falls away to expose the underlying colonial framework of an undemocratic, apartheid state that denies Palestinians the right to have rights. It suggests that the United Nations resolution in 2005, establishing January 27 as International Holocaust Remembrance Day, initiated by the Israeli delegation to counter the dominant Palestinian narrative in the UN, should be altered to International Genocide Remembrance Day. It would rightly situate, as Aimé Césaire argued over seventy years ago, the Holocaust in the deeper history of Occidental modernity’s continual racialisation of others and its subsequent genocidal colonial practices: from the Americas, Asia and Africa, through the European Holocaust to genocide in the eastern Mediterranean today¹². The memory of the Holocaust, institutionally honed down exclusively into the defence of Israel and the Zionist project, now means any criticism of the genocide in Gaza is deemed antisemitism and drifts into stirring up increasing authoritarian waters in the “democratic” West. So, what sort of historical and ethical memory is that?

We can all be fascists, including Jews. Memory, tragedy and historical crimes provide no immunity. In my personal participation at the German art exhibition

10 S. Azeb, *We May Never Return Again (A Celebration of Our Aliveness)*, in “The Funambulist”, n. 58, March-April 2025. Also see Olga Solombrino on living on in the digital geographies of Palestine in O. Solombrino, *Arcipelago Palestina. Territori e narrazioni digitali*, Mimesis, Milano 2019.

11 A. Goldberg, *Holocaust Memory in a Time of Genocide*, in “Zeteo”, July 30, 2025: https://zeteo.com/p/holocaust-memory-in-a-time-of-genocide?utm_campaign=post&utm_medium=web&fbclid=IwY2xjawMUH3xleHRuA2FlbQlXMQABHupNHgT33JN4U4HPnppMdHwMCqfvqWzm22hQvyPQ_L0Iez6TN6DicJKlk0qn_aem_oXltkV1k42QJHKDFi3kEBA

12 A. Césaire, *Discourse on Colonialism* (1950), NYU Press, New York 2001.

Documenta 15 in the summer of 2022, I was informed that antisemitism must not be associated with other modalities of racism. I thought to myself that this sort of exclusivity is ultimately a variation of white supremacy. After all, to recognise in antisemitism the history of Europe fearing alterity, where racism and genocide have sustained and justified each other, would take us to acknowledging the deeper communalities of anti-Muslim and anti-Black racisms and the repressed alliance between Jews and Muslims, even between... Israelis and Palestinians. Not yet, it seems. We are not allowed to talk about the Jewish genocide in the same space as racism, slavery and white supremacy, although these histories are inexorably linked and clearly mesh with each other. As Amos Goldberg concludes his sensitive discussion: "Thus, mainstream Holocaust memory has become part of the problem of genocide instead of part of the solution. It has become what scholars call an 'enabling factor' for genocide, rather than a preventative force that cultivates moral sensitivity and political awareness to help fight genocide and mass violence".

On this note, perhaps it is the case to open a hole in time and return to Hannah Arendt on the colonial formation of totalitarianism that returns to haunt and interrogate the present¹³. We could set this possibility alongside her observation that Adolf Eichmann should have been tried in Europe – the site of the Holocaust and European antisemitism – and not in Jerusalem, where he had committed no crimes. His trial in historical Palestine served to seal the pact between the Shoah and the new state of Israel, between Judaism and Zionism. It effectively secured the latter's moral authority over the former. Once again, the West evaded its history of antisemitism and colonial responsibilities, leaving a court in Jerusalem to sequester the case.

Images by kind concession of the artist Andrew Gilbert.

13 H. Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1951), Penguin, London 2017.