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Will the West Normalise Genocide?



Photograph by Nathaniel St. Clair

At the last London protest – the 18th National march against the Genocide in Gaza – a solitary protester held up a home-made sign which read, ‘Imagine Being Stupid Enough to Actually believe A Genocide Doesn’t Affect You’, which I took not only as an exhortation to remember our common humanity, but also as a warning to us all if we don’t.

The next day an ad for Jordan Peterson’s latest podcast: ‘Foundations of the West’ popped up on my screen. The image, which wouldn’t shame a 90s boy-band – seemed to be presenting something of historic importance: Peterson and four of his chums, sitting on ancient steps, hands clasped in thoughtful repose. The accompanying caption described their worthy mission as ‘focusing on the necessity of a unifying vision for the future.’ And the trailer, which opens with a whirling Gladiator-style vista, shows the lads chatting whilst walking around old monuments. The only other member I recognised was Ben Shapiro. But it seems safe to assume, having heard the pro-Zionist views of both Peterson and Shapiro that my

protester's exhortation will not be working on them. And that when these self-appointed cultural representatives get down to the earnest task of sorting out the 'vision that unites us', the fact that we are watching an ongoing Genocide won't be included. Which should give us all pause for thought, because if normal life is now a spectacle of undiluted horror, openly aided and abetted by our entire political class then the vision that is 'uniting' society is something humanity needs to slough off.

The late Edward Said was the acknowledged master commentator on issues pertaining to the relationship between cultural representation and politics. In works such as 'Orientalism' and 'Culture and Imperialism', Said exposed the links between different aspects of colonial power, the soft-cultural and the hard-military, and showed how the former so often enable and support the latter. Said showed that it is how we talk about 'the other', what images we create of them and how we represent them to ourselves in the novels, plays and films that fill our cultural repartee that determines how we see them, or don't see them. Those shared cultural images also provide us with the necessary moral justification for utilising 'the other' to fulfil what we regard as our historic destiny.

According to Said, it is the underlying belief system, the idealistic architecture of values and purpose that an Imperial power relies on that is used to legitimise its exploitative practices, however cruel or inhumane. Whether expressed as 'the White Man's Burden' for the British, 'Mission Civilisatrice' for the French, or America's notion of 'Manifest Destiny' and 'Exceptionalism', all settler/colonial projects cloak themselves in some idealistic justificatory garb and Israel is no exception.

In 'The Origins of Modern Zionism', Shlomo Avineri, Professor of Political Science at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, lays out 'the intellectual origins of the Jewish State'. According to Avineri, "Zionism was a post-emancipation phenomenon." Meaning that it came into being not when antisemitism was rife, but when it ended. And the reason Zionism emerged later is because with liberalism came assimilation and inter-marriage which threatened the collective identity Jewish communities had built up over centuries. According to Zionist journalist, Ahad Ha'am, [Asher Ginzberg] the problem was modern culture itself, "[it] overturns the defences of Judaism from within so that Judaism can no longer remain isolated and live a life apart." Obviously, for an individual, liberalism and assimilation were a good thing – between 1882 to 1914 over 3 million Jews emigrated from Eastern Europe to the USA and Canada, with less than 1% going to Palestine. But assimilation was not good for the collective Jewish community which became hollowed out as a result. As Leon Simon, a leading British Zionist who helped draft the Balfour Declaration confirms, "Even in England,

where antisemitism is practically unknown, there is none the less a Jewish problem, because the synagogues are empty.....and there is a great deal of drift into assimilation and intermarriage.” Orthodox Jews would continue to live in their collective religious communities with a self-imposed separation from the rest of liberal society, as they still do today. But for the non-orthodox community, liberalism presented a novel challenge and Zionism was the novel solution.

With all the competing nationalisms emerging in Europe, together with the challenges of secular life, it is hardly surprising that some Jews looked to Zionism’s promise of a Jewish homeland as an answer. Nevertheless, there was a lot of Jewish opposition to Zionism and not just from the Orthodox community. Many Jewish intellectuals regarded any notion of Jewish nationalism as a betrayal of Judaic principles and voiced their opposition through books, pamphlets and lobbying. Lord Edwin Montagu – the only Jewish member of Lloyd George’s cabinet in 1917 was a particularly vociferous opponent not just of the Balfour Declaration, but of the Zionist movement more generally.

However, there was not just one form of Zionism. In the early days many Zionists who went to Palestine were not in search of an exclusively Jewish homeland and wanted to achieve a cooperative relationship with the native Palestinians. The best known ‘Bi-National’ Zionist is probably Martin Buber, author of ‘Land of Two Peoples’, who insisted that as ‘interlopers’ the obligation was on them to win the trust of the indigenous Palestinians and to help them to realise their aspiration for a nation state.

Buber was not alone in his belief that politics was the test of the spirit of Judaism. But some, like his friend Hans Kohn, author of ‘The Idea of Nationalism’, who would later become an academic in the US, were horrified by the violence and left. In 1929 Kohn wrote to Buber, who was then still living in Germany, “You are fortunate not to witness the details of the Palestinian and Zionist reality, for with Zionism as it is today, the objectives of Zionism cannot be affirmed. I fear we support something we are unable to comprehend. That something drives us from misconceived solidarity, ever deeper into the morass. Zionism will either be peaceful or it will be without me. Zionism is *not* Judaism.”

With hindsight, Buber’s early optimism looks naïve. But maybe he had not recognized what a strategic prize Palestine represented for the West as Balfour’s 1919 declaration of support for Zionism makes clear. “The Four great powers are committed to Zionism and Zionism, be it right or wrong, good or bad, is rooted in age-long tradition, in present needs, in future hopes of a far profounder import than the desires and prejudices of the 700,000 Arabs who now inhabit that ancient land.” In any event, by 1961 Buber’s mood had become more sombre,

“Only an internal revolution can have the power to heal our people of their murderous sickness of causeless hatred (for the Arabs). It is bound to bring complete ruin upon us.”

Zionism appears to have been an idea with more than one facet, in the early days at least. Perhaps it could have gone in a different direction, as Buber had hoped. But it didn't and instead an exclusively Jewish state was established and most of the indigenous population were ethnically cleansed. The essential point though is that there never was anything inherently righteous about Zionism. It was a practical solution to a practical problem worked out by secular European intellectuals with the funding of Western capitalism. It was and still is simply a novel exclusionary form of nationalism. Only later did the idea became weaponised – by attempting to make the terms ‘Zionism’ and ‘Judaism’ coterminous – in order to block legitimate political critique. And, as with any idea, it is how it is represented that counts.

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When Said wrote about Zionism, he obviously did so from the point of view of its victims, his people, who had been made to pay a concrete price for the abstract European idea that had been brought to their land. (It goes without saying that nothing like Zionism existed amongst Arab Jews; as Iraqi-born, Avi Shlaim recounts in his memoir – it was impossible for Arab Jews to feel at home in such a Eurocentric state where they tended to live on the margins of society). Said recognised the importance of understanding the intellectual ferment that gave birth to Zionism, but it was the way it was represented that gave it life. According to Said the reason Zionism succeeded as a military operation was because the political battle for Palestine had already been won “in the international world in which ideas, representations, rhetoric and images were at issue.” Two literary works singled out in this regard, by Said and also by Ghassan Kanafani – a Palestinian novelist assassinated by Mossad in 1972, are George Eliot's ‘Daniel Deronda’ written in 1876 which could be considered a hi-brow, proto-Zionist, Victorian wanderlust affair. And Leon Uris's ‘Exodus’, a colourful, Arab-bashing, pro-Israel page-turner, written in 1955, and which was shortly thereafter turned into a Hollywood blockbuster. Both representations were massively influential in promoting Zionism although, obviously, in very different ways.

Daniel Deronda is a rootless, spiritually homeless young man living in Liberal Victorian England with other bored and rootless individuals who are all united by the fact that they are in search of meaning. Unlike the other characters, Deronda later discovers that he is Jewish and decides to escape the barrenness of his life in England by going to Palestine. As Said writes, “Eliot uses the plight of Jews to make a universal statement about the 19th century

need for a home, given the spiritual and psychological rootlessness reflected in her characters almost ontological physical restlessness.” Another character, Gwendolyn, a young spirited woman who has been dragged around Europe by her mother and is tired of her cosmopolitan existence, envies Deronda his chance of escape, whilst all she can look forward to is a loveless marriage.

Essentially, it’s a book about the importance of belonging somewhere. As Eliot writes, “A human life, I think, should be well rooted in some spot of a native land, where it may get the love of tender kinship for the face of the earth.” What Eliot does not mention is the fact that whilst her characters have a desire for adventure and meaning, and are, indeed, seeking to forge a connection with a piece of land just as she prescribes, there are already people living on the very ‘spot of native land’ they covet who are not suffering from the same liberal malaise. And it is their actual homes that are going to have to be demolished to make way for ‘the spiritually homeless’. (In 1948 Israel destroyed 400 of the 508 extant Palestinian villages – taken apart stone by stone so that not even the cemeteries remained.) As Moshe Dayan affirmed in 1969 “There is not one place built in this country that did not have a former Arab Population.” Of course, Eliot can’t be blamed for not mentioning the native inhabitants, she is writing at a time when indigenous people didn’t count. Even if they were acknowledged to exist, they were not deemed worthy of discussion because they were not considered historically relevant: not being ‘doers’ or producers of anything– just part of the fauna. They were ‘objects’ of history, as Samuel P. Huntington would say, not its subjects. Not yet. For anyone reading the novel today it is impossible not to recognise that what Eliot concretised in the fortunes of Deronda is the coming wanderlust and search for meaning of generations of bored western liberals.

If Deronda was written at a time when ‘the other’ was invisible to western culture, and so didn’t warrant a mention, by the time Uris penned Exodus that was no longer the case. In the Middle East all the other category ‘A’ mandated countries: Syria, Iraq and Lebanon had attained their independence, as promised in the mandate. Palestine alone had been denied. It was inevitable that the presence of Palestinians would become problematic for the Western-backed Zionist project: the only people in the world who have been denied and are still being denied their entry into history, still seen as objects rather than subjects: uniquely burdened with “negative rights”, as Chomsky would later observe. In years to come, Palestinians would be represented as terrorists in an attempt to de-legitimise them – as indeed is the case in Gaza today. But Uris chose to implicate them in the holocaust which was a more obvious ploy just after the Second World War. As Ghassan Kanafani notes in his review of Zionist literature,

published in 1967, “It is nearly impossible for one to find Palestine treated in a Zionist novel without a reference to Hitler’s massacres.” Here is Uris’s less than subtle segue, “Ours not to reason why.... I can’t seem to forget the Arab slave markets in Saudi Arabia and the first time I was invited to watch a man have his hands amputated as punishment for stealing, and somehow I can’t forget those Jews at Bergen-Belsen.”

Uris ploughs on with another popular trope – Arab backwardness and the superiority of Western civilisation, “Israel today stands as the greatest single instrument for bringing the Arab people out of the Dark Ages.” As I am sure Peterson has discovered in his momentous search for the West’s foundations, the Dark Ages, marks a period of history experienced exclusively by Christian Europe. The light was turned off when the Christian church closed Plato’s Academy and forced the philosophers eastwards to Arab lands. The contrast could not be sharper, because whilst the West was milling around in the darkness, the Golden Age of learning in Andalusia was in full swing. Indeed, there would not have been a Renaissance without the later infusion of Arab knowledge. But it seems as though the West is ontologically incapable of recognising the outstanding achievements of other civilisations and cultures.

Yet, for many Americans, and Europeans too no doubt – I remember watching the film as a kid and thinking it was brilliant – Uris’s representation of the Middle East is to be preferred. It is shorter, punchier, Paul Newman is in it, and you end up on the winning side, which for believers in ‘Exceptionalism’ is probably quite important. Thus, it is hardly surprising that for an older generation, the continuing conflicts in the Middle East are viewed predominantly as footnotes to the novel.

And it remains the case still today that it is in the world of representations that the real contestation between the Israeli occupation and Palestinian rights is taking place. It seems obvious, because whilst the reality of the genocide is being live-streamed 24/7 on social media, none of the deaths or destruction make any difference to government policy or mainstream opinion. Even in the face of blatant legal culpability, Israel faces no consequences. Every now and then the UN passes ‘a resolution’, but the next day Israel drops yet more American bombs on people sleeping in tents. At which point we should probably ask ourselves whether the murder of every single Palestinian would have any effect on the West’s foreign policy. My guess is that it wouldn’t. Because what matters are the essential myths that comprise our history, identity and values, and the Palestinians don’t feature in any of that. And even though those myths may appear fragile, irrational and even contradictory that is irrelevant when it comes to matters as foundational as collective identity and historical

purpose. So when Netanyahu blathers on that He is one of us and that over there is like the West, just a tougher neighbourhood, he is tapping into our familiar representational world and people nod their head.

Said recognised that Israel held a certain value in the Western mind – not just in terms of being an economic place holder but also as part of its cultural identity as a superior ethos with higher values and knowledge. And that to question the violence of Israel’s founding or its oppression of the Palestinian people was to affront Western sensibilities. He considered the shameless contortions of the Liberal class to be ‘grotesque’ as they struggled to conform their progressive worldviews to Israel’s ongoing atrocities decade after decade. And he called out the spurious scholarship and rewritten histories which attempted to efface the Palestinians and to justify the violence meted out to them. “A threadbare hoax”, like Joan Peters ‘From Time Immemorial’ which was lauded and awarded prizes by an obeisant American literati before being demolished by Finkelstein’s forensic critique, (only begrudgingly published in the US after the book was excoriated in the UK.) But surely even Said would have been shocked at the depths our cultural aparatchiks plumb today as they attempt to normalise the ongoing genocide.

And yet, although Said was right that “Zionism and its partisans command the resources of diffusion and representation in the West”, there has been a historical shift. The lies and misinformation may continue, but the representations have changed and today Israel looks fake. It’s ironic that a nation that has done so much to eviscerate the presence of the indigenous people in an attempt to establish its own faux historical legitimacy, ends up being upbraided in the authenticity stakes by people living in rubble. The hospital hasbara that was so outlandish it came across as parody didn’t help and nor did the brattish behaviour of Israel Junior at the UN, but it is the resilience of the Palestinian people that has shown Israel up as counterfeit. In the battle of representations, it is the Palestinian people who have won.

Which is why Western bombast – following Netanyahu’s lead – now extends to the whole Islamic civilisation and its imagined threat to Western Values; whatever they are. Although it is 30 years since Huntington’s article on ‘The Clash of Civilisations’, Western panic over Palestinian resilience has brought it to the fore. Said described the article as bellicose and war-mongering. He also thought it culturally illiterate, since Huntington evinced no knowledge about how cultures and civilisations actually grow, evolve and interact. But that’s irrelevant in the world of representations, where all that matters is what people can be persuaded to believe. And to that end, a whole army of ‘Western Values’ pundits have, on cue, mustered to the ‘Civilisational’ cause. Whether it be populists in Europe tapping into

anti-immigrant sentiment or pseudo public intellectuals, taking to their armchairs to warn the public of the existential danger they face from people who are against genocide. But, of course, it is just a hoax, another crude representation put out to persuade people to forget their common humanity and align with the Western hegemon in its last throes of historical dominance.

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