

HOW SHOULD WE SPEAK ABOUT THE JEWS AND THE PALESTINIANS? CONSTRUCTING A NON-RACIST SPACE FOR CRITICISM

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No name is yours until you speak it; somebody returns your call and suddenly, the circuit of signs, gestures, gesticulations is established and you enter the territory of the right to narrate. You are part of a dialogue that may not, at first, be heard or heralded – you may be ignored – but your personhood cannot be denied. In another's country that is also your own, your person divides, and in following the forked path you encounter yourself in a double movement... once as stranger, and then as friend.

Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*¹

When the Oslo Peace Accords were signed I distinctly remember feeling the final rupture, the termination of what for years I had called my narrative. My bubble, my illusion, was burst.

Raja Shehadeh, *Palestinian Walks*²

Introduction

The question of Palestine/Israel is so intricate, heated and burdened with history that is difficult even to begin speaking about it, let alone find ways of solving the conflict. The purpose of my paper is, therefore, to discuss hidden traditions, discursive models and critical concepts that might help us to question and reformulate what appears as an unsolvable and eternal war. As I deal with the intricacies of power and knowledge, my main protagonists will be critical thinkers and intellectuals; public figures that, from somewhat *outsider* positions, have challenged the hegemonic stance of their own community or state.

Having previously worked on Primo Levi and the Holocaust,³ my investigation here is framed by the same two principles, discussed in Judith Butler's *Parting Ways: Jewishness and the Critique of Zionism*⁴, that motivated Levi's opposition to Begin and the Israeli government at the time of the 1982 invasion of Lebanon. The first, twofold, principle is:

to distinguish firmly enough between (a) the need to remember and oppose any form of historical revisionism that would consign to oblivion the destruction and forcible displacement of any people (a task that assumes a crucial connection between memory and critical opposition) and (b) the absolute need to reject all instrumentalisations of historical traumas, such as the Shoah, for the purposes of legitimating an illegitimate regime.⁵

The second principle is to debunk the equation between Jewishness and Zionism, and to try to examine the latter from both the standpoint of the victims of antisemitism and from the standpoints of the

Palestinians⁶ and the Arab and African Jews⁷, highlighting the instances of ‘linked life’ that stubbornly resist the preposterous will to disjoint one’s Self from the Other.⁸

To contrast the racialised discourses that permeate and recurrently rekindle the Arab-Israeli conflict I will ask: what kind of Jewish and Palestinian ideas, traditions and authors harbour a potential for constructing models of coexistence? What kind of concepts should we re-discover and elaborate in order to foster self-criticism, open debate and transversal recognition on both sides of the Arab-Israeli conflict? And what kind of connections can we draw in order to deconstruct the very idea of ‘two sides’ and challenge the separatist imagination? These questions have already been explored by a significant number of authors, intellectuals (Edward Said, Mahmoud Darwish, Ella Shohat, Jaqueline Rose, Judith Butler, Idith Zertal, to name but a few) and ordinary people, to whose work and living example I am indebted.

My main focus, therefore, is on Jewishness and on the political trajectory of world Jewry. My aim is to address the asymmetry of power that characterises the Palestinian-Israeli conflict and to explore the inseparability of the Arab and the Jew. Given the large scope of the subject, I will only be able to touch on a small number of the issues that inform the debate on Israel/Palestine. I will, therefore, structure my argument in three parts: First, I will briefly analyse the cultural and political consequences of what historian Enzo Traverso has called the ‘end of Jewish modernity’⁹ and discuss the evolution of anti-Jewish and anti-Muslim racisms. Second, I will look at how Hannah Arendt’s concept of the Jew as pariah can evolve into a form of political contestation¹⁰, that is to say, into a subjectivity that transcends parochial interests to devise frameworks of cohabitation. Finally, I will explore how Edward Said’s concept of counterpoint might be applied to an analysis of society and a reading of identity that enable us to rethink the relationship between Jews and Arabs, as well as the identity of each of the two terms.

Anti-Jewish and anti-Muslim racisms

Traverso identifies Jewish modernity with the period that stretches from the Enlightenment to the Second World War¹¹. During this period, Jews had an outward orientation and were the main source of critical thinking and political dissent within the West. However, the Holocaust and its aftermath brought this trajectory to an end. As Traverso and other historians argue¹², Jews now find themselves, thanks to a paradoxical reversal, at the heart of the Western apparatus of domination. If the first half of the 20th century had been the age of Kafka, Freud, Benjamin, Rosa Luxemburg and Leon Trotsky, the second is represented by figures like Raymond Aron, Leo Strauss, Henry Kissinger and Ariel Sharon. Admittedly, we could identify other strands, like those represented by Lévi Strauss and Eric Hobsbawm, Emmanuel Levinas and Jacques Derrida, Noam Chomsky and Judith Butler. These intellectuals prove that critical thinking still holds an important place within the Jewish tradition and that the Jewish community is anything but monolithic.

Nonetheless, the general tendency is that of a conservative turn: from the mid-1960s onwards most Jews have been ‘in tune’ with the geopolitical mood that America sets on the West. As Novick points

out ‘the political movement called neo-conservatism was almost exclusively a Jewish affair; *Commentary*, published by the American Jewish Committee, became America’s best-known conservative magazine’¹³. What are the social and political consequences of this rightward and inward turn? How did this cultural shift affect the question of Palestine/Israel? And how did the global geopolitical events and the history of the State of Israel shape the evolution of anti-Jewish and anti-Muslim racisms? Bearing in mind that we are speaking about *general* trends of heterogeneous and complex phenomena, I think that we can identify seven main consequences:

- the displacement of the axis of the Jewish world – at a demographic, cultural, and political level – from Europe to the United States and Israel;
- the disappearance of the ‘hidden tradition’ of ‘pariah Jewishness’, and the corresponding fading out of Jewish universalism. The Second World War and the foundation of the State of Israel have considerably undermined the ‘extraterritorial’ attitude celebrated by writers like Siegfried Kracauer, Joseph Roth and Stefan Zweig, thereby relegating Jewish cosmopolitanism to the ‘world of yesterday’;
- the rise of Israeli nationalism, energised by the exclusionary policies of political Zionism;
- the institutionalisation – and sometimes the exploitation – of Holocaust memory as a ‘civil religion’ of Western liberal democracies;
- the replacement of the European ‘Jewish question’ by the tangled question of Palestine;
- the decline of traditional antisemitism and the rise of Islamophobia and of new forms of antisemitism;
- and the birth of a new ‘pariah people’ and a new category of refugees: the Palestinians.

As Traverso notes, modern racism reached its darkest moment in the last century with the planning and implementation of the Final Solution¹⁴. After this terrible act, its ‘racialist’ and pseudo-biological orientation (based on the theories of Gobineau, Chamberlain, Vacher de Lapouge, Lombroso and others) was gradually abandoned, and racism became a ‘differentialist’ and ethnocentric argument about cultures that naturalises historical differences and justifies exclusion. We can thus distinguish between ideological antisemitism – which culminated in Hitler’s policies – from antisemitism as prejudice and social practice, which exists today. The former perceived the Jews as elements that destabilised the nation, the values and the very structure of traditional Europe. The latter persists as an ill-concealed and variously motivated hostility to the Jews, which has taken the forms of Holocaust denial, extremist Judeophobia and anti-Israeli terrorism. Fed by the growth of Islamic fundamentalism and by the social marginalisation experienced by many first and second-generation immigrants in the West, the new antisemitism often lumps together American imperialism, Israel, the West and the symbols of Jewish faith. However, as far as the question of Palestine/Israel is concerned, it should also be noted that the Israeli government has a share of responsibility in the development of this anti-Jewish feeling. By claiming to represent *all* Jewish people, several Israeli politicians have indeed promoted the fallacious identification between Jewishness and Zionism.

Notwithstanding these deplorable forms of antisemitism, most racism today is directed at the Islamic world. If between the end of the 19th century and the Second World War the Jew represented Europe's Other, the main targets of today's racism in Western liberal democracies are immigrants and Muslims. The figure of the Arab-Muslim depicted by current xenophobia is, therefore, comparable to that of the Jew at the beginning of the 20th century. The old stereotypical representation of East European Jews corresponds to the widespread distorted image of Islam in today's Western media. In both cases Judaism and Islam play the function of negative metaphors of otherness, representing an alien element that cannot integrate itself in the national community.

In the media and in the European political debate, Islam is often portrayed as essentially violent, extremist, backward, restrictive, and as the source of conflict and terrorism. Little attention is paid to the immense variety of the Muslim world (composed of over 1.6 billion people) and to the social and moral values promoted by Islam. This distorted image has a huge impact on the Arab-Israeli conflict, which is fed by – and feeds in turn – the Islamophobic tendencies of the West. Indeed, as Said noted, Orientalism governs Israeli policy towards the Arabs¹⁵:

The Arab is conceived of now as a shadow that dogs the Jew. In that shadow – because Arabs and Jews are Oriental Semites – can be placed whatever traditional, latent mistrust a Westerner feels towards the Oriental. For the Jew of pre-Nazi Europe has bifurcated: what we have now is a Jewish hero, constructed out of a reconstructed cult of the adventurer-pioneer-Orientalist (Burton, Lane, Renan), and his creeping, mysteriously fearsome shadow, the Arab Oriental.¹⁶

Said's remarks draw attention to the experiences that connect Jews and Arabs, Israelis and Palestinians. Indeed, the broader picture above suggests that, while looking for discursive models to approach the question of Palestine/Israel, we can focus on *at least* one historical condition that both Jews and Palestinians have – albeit at different times – experienced: statelessness and the deprivation of human rights that follows dispossession.

The 'conscious pariah'

This brings us to the second point. When the condition of statelessness and social exclusion becomes a standpoint from which one observes the world, when a discriminated group of people draws on its own experience to fight against widespread injustice, we then have what Hannah Arendt called the 'conscious pariah'.¹⁷ For Arendt, the 'hidden tradition' of 'pariah Jewishness' was that of the emancipated Jews between the two world wars who, aware of being an 'uncomfortable' minority within the system of nation-states, started an emancipation of their own and developed an extraordinary intellectual sensitivity. By overcoming the false alternative between Zionism and assimilation, they universalised their alienated condition in order to criticise the aporias of belonging and the flaws of nationalism.

The concept of the pariah thus evolved into a human type, into a form of contestation that transcended cultural and social differences. We should be careful, however, not to romanticise this condition. The

flip-side of the pariah's heightened imagination was a total loss of rights and a radical exclusion from political life. Arendt cites a passage from Kafka's *Castle* that epitomises the condition of the Jewish pariah in the 1930s: 'You are not of the Castle and you are not of the village, you are nothing at all.'¹⁸ In other words, the other side of pariah's humanity is the condition of absolute lawlessness and deprivation that Arendt describes in the central section of *The Origins of Totalitarianism*¹⁹. Analysing the problem of the minorities and the formation of stateless people after the First World War, she shows that 'the fundamental deprivation of human rights is manifested first and above all in the deprivation of a place in the world which makes opinions significant and actions effective'²⁰. This allows her to draw a connection between the condition of the Jews before the Second World War and that of the Palestinians:

After the war it turned out that the Jewish question, which was considered the only insoluble one, was indeed solved – namely, by means of a colonised and then conquered territory – but this solved neither the problem of the minorities nor the stateless. On the contrary, like virtually all other events of our century, the solution of the Jewish question merely produced a new category of refugees, the Arabs, thereby increasing the number of the stateless and rightless by another 700,000 to 800,000 people.²¹

Yet, while Jews and Palestinians experienced a similar loss of political rights, the histories of Jewish and Palestinian statelessness are quite different. As Arendt pointed out, at the beginning of the 20th century, Jews 'formed a majority in no country and could therefore be regarded as *minorité par excellence*, i.e., the only minority whose interests could be defended only by internationally guaranteed protection'²². As a result, after the First World War they constituted the most prominent group of stateless people created by the Peace Treaties. Thus, when Hitler came to power he had little trouble in depriving Jews of all legal status and cutting them off from the rest of the society. The Jewish people's lack (or loss) of a polity able to guarantee their human and political rights was, therefore, a crucial factor in historical processes that led to the Final Solution.

The case of Palestinians refugees involved less bloodshed, but is no less complicated and tragic. The Palestinians did constitute a coherent national community – both in geographical and cultural terms – when the people of the first *aliyyot* (Jewish migration to the 'Land of Israel') arrived in Ottoman and later in British Mandate Palestine. Indeed, when the first Arab-Israeli War broke out in 1948, Palestine was still about 30 per cent Jewish and 70 per cent Arab. In the spring of 1948, a series of massacres perpetrated by Israeli military units spread panic among the major Arab and rural areas, leading about 800,000 Palestinians to flee to Jordan, Lebanon, Syria and Gaza²³. Then, in December, the UN General Assembly passed resolution 194 recognising the refugees' right to return to their homes²⁴. But the newly established state of Israel refused to let them do so, thus enforcing racially discriminatory immigration laws that allow any Jew anywhere to become a citizen but deny thousands of Palestinians the basic right of return. The phenomena of Jewish and Palestinian statelessness differ, therefore, in terms of socio-political context, ideological causes and end result. But they share the fundamental fact that 'the loss of community willing and able to guarantee any rights whatsoever'²⁵ was the prerequisite for the dispossession of both Jews and Palestinians and their expulsion from humanity.

The foundation of Israel and the Nakbah thus created a connection not only in terms of loss, suffering and collective memory, but also between ‘pariah Jewishness’ and Palestinian exile. This connection is perhaps best explored in Said’s writings, which emphasise the political need to link the Jewish and Palestinian experiences, without overlooking what is specific about each. In his discussion of Western representation and political approaches to the ‘Orient’, Said demonstrates that Orientalism and modern antisemitism have a common root, which consists in the process of ‘othering’ whereby the Christian West has differentiated itself from, and identified itself against, *both* Jews and Arabs. As he writes, ‘the transference of a popular anti-Semitic animus from a Jewish to Arab target was made smoothly since the figure was essentially the same’²⁶. This scholarly breakthrough enables a deeper understanding of the paradoxes of the Zionist orientalist imagination, ‘as a discourse that distinguishes between Arabs and Jews while simultaneously collapsing the differences between them’²⁷. But it also pinpoints the shared experiences and discursive tools that can be mobilised to read Palestinian and Jewish history together and construct a space for self-examination and mutual acknowledgment.

Counterpoint

I would like to conclude by examining one of these shared experiences: the real and metaphorical condition of exile and how it enables a double perspective in which ‘an idea or experience is always counterposed with another, therefore making both appear in a sometimes new and unpredictable light’²⁸. In the essay ‘Reflections on Exile’, Said shows that exile and nationalism are often two sides of the same coin²⁹. Exile ‘is the unhealable rift forced between a human being and a native place, between the self and its true home’³⁰. This condition of loss and estrangement has often catalysed collective feelings to reconstruct ‘a community of language, culture, and customs’³¹. The interplay between nationalism and exile is, like Hegel’s dialectic of servant and master, opposites informing and constituting each other. ‘How, then’, Said asks, ‘does one surmount the loneliness of exile without falling into the encompassing and thumping language of national pride, collective sentiments, group passions?’³² What useful concepts can we derive from pariah existence and exile to construct a non-racist space for criticism? How can these historically situated experiences help us to reframe and rethink the seemingly unsolvable rift between Jews and Palestinians?

Drawing on his studies of music and on his own intellectual trajectory, Said links the condition of exile to the concept of counterpoint, showing the critical potential that stems from the combination of the two.

Seeing ‘the entire world as a foreign land’ makes possible originality of vision. Most people are principally aware of one culture, one setting, one home; exiles are aware of at least two, and this plurality of vision gives rise to *an awareness of simultaneous dimensions*, an awareness that – to borrow a phrase from music – is *contrapuntal*.³³ [My emphasis.]

‘In the counterpoint of Western classical music,’ Said explains, ‘various themes play off one another, with only a provisional privilege being given to any particular one; yet in the resulting polyphony there is concert and order, an organised interplay that derives from the themes, not from a rigorous

melodic or formal principle outside the work'³⁴. In the same way, he argues, we can approach novels, collective memories and political disputes, 'with a *simultaneous awareness* both of the metropolitan history that is narrated and of those other histories against which (and together with which) the dominating discourse acts'³⁵. Contrapuntal reading is, therefore, a way of listening to the plurality of voices of Jews and Palestinians, of seeing cultural identities not as essentialisations, but as mixed ensembles constituted *with* and *through* the Other. This enables us to think through and interpret experiences that are discrepant, each with its particular agenda and pace of development, its own historical traumas, its internal coherence and system of external relationships, all of them coexisting and interacting with others.

In political terms, the idea of contrapuntality calls for an equal and inclusive concept of citizenship and gestures towards bi-nationalism as a way of undoing nationalism. Said insisted on this idea in the last years of his life, seeing it as a way of attending to the multicultural, multiethnic, and multi-religious reality of the region. Drawing on the writings of thinkers such as Judah Magnes, Buber and Arendt, he argued that bi-nationalism has become the only way of achieving coexistence, via the creation of a state based on 'the idea and practice of citizenship, not of ethnic or racial community'³⁶. Far from being a utopian vision, the 'one-state solution' is for Said the only way of granting self-determination to both people, acknowledging that, given the current situation, 'short of ethnic cleansing or "mass transfer" there is no way for Israel to get rid of the Palestinians or for Palestinians to wish Israelis away'³⁷. Bi-nationalism is therefore a way of reading Palestinian and Jewish history together, dismantling the secular and religious chauvinism which each side has fenced itself into. It is in this framework that we should understand the contrapuntal announcement that Said made in an interview with the Israeli daily *Ha'aretz*³⁸, where he concluded a discussion about home, belonging and exile with the following words: 'I'm the last Jewish intellectual [...] The only true follower of Adorno.' Why Adorno? What had he said? In *Minima Moralia*, an autobiography composed while in exile, Adorno had written: 'it is part of morality not to be at home in one's home'³⁹. I believe that this must be starting point for a serious discussion of the question of Palestine/Israel.

Notes

¹ H. K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, London, Routledge, 2014 (new edition), xxv.

² R. Shehadeh, *Palestinian Walks: Notes on a Vanishing Landscape*, London, Profile, 2007, 124.

³ I discuss Primo Levi's vision of Israel in an article entitled 'The Wound and the Hope: Primo Levi's Troubled Relationship with Israel', that will be published in a special issue of *NeMLA Italian Studies* dedicated to 'The Jewish Experience in Contemporary Italy', forthcoming 2016.

⁴ J. Butler, *Parting Ways. Jewishness and the Critique of Zionism*, New York, Columbia University Press, 2012.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 200. Butler also discusses the way in which the charge of antisemitism is used to quell dissent on the matter of Israel. She argues that 'the possibility of a substantive Jewish peace movement depends upon (a) a productive and critical distance from the state of Israel (one that can be coupled with a profound investment in what future course it takes), and (b) a clear distinction between antisemitism, on the one hand, and forms of protest against the Israeli state

based on that critical distance, on the other.' J. Butler, 'The Charge of Antisemitism: Jews, Israel and the Risks of Public Critique', in *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence*. London: Verso, 2004, 111). Indeed, in order to construct a space for criticism we necessarily need to distinguish between states and citizens and support the commitment to critical inquiry and pluralism.

⁶ E. Said, *The Question of Palestine*, New York, Vintage, 1992 (new edition).

⁷ E. Shohat, 'Sephardim in Israel: Zionism from the Standpoint of its Jewish Victims', *Social Text*, 19/20, 1988, 1-35.

⁸ G.Z. Hochberg, *In Spite of Partition: Jews, Arabs and the Limits of Separatist imagination*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2007. Drawing on the work of Said and others, Hochberg writes: '[D]espite the elaborate system of checkpoints, the numerous fences, walls, and roads, all set to police human traffic and separate Arabs from Jews, and regardless of how much most Israelis and Palestinians may wish to exist apart, the demographic, territorial, and economic reality in Israel/Palestine is such that the two people are forced to share an inextricably linked life.' *Ibid.*, 4-5.

⁹ E. Traverso, *La Fin de la Modernité Juive: Histoire d'un Tournant Conservateur (The End of Jewish Modernity: History of a Conservative Turn)*, Paris, La Découverte, 2013.

¹⁰ H. Arendt, *The Jewish Writings*, (Edited by Jerome Kohn and Ron H. Feldman), New York, Shocken, 2007.

¹¹ Traverso, *La Fin de la Modernité Juive*.

¹² See, for example, P. Novick, *The Holocaust in American Life*, New York, Houghton Mifflin, 1999; I. Pappe, *The Idea of Israel: A History of Power and Knowledge*, London, Verso, 2014; A. Raz-Krakotzkin, *Exil et Souveraineté: Judaïsme, Sionisme et Pensée Binationale*, Paris, La Fabrique, 2007.

¹³ Novick, *The Holocaust in American Life*, 183.

¹⁴ Traverso, *La Fin de la Modernité Juive*, 107-127.

¹⁵ E. Said, *Orientalism*, London, Penguin, 2003 (new edition), 306.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 286.

¹⁷ Arendt, *The Jewish Writings*, 275-297. See also Zertal's excellent discussion of Arendt's views of Israel and Zionism in: I. Zertal, *Israel's Holocaust and the Politics of Nationhood*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2005, 128-163.

¹⁸ Arendt, *The Jewish Writings*, 290.

¹⁹ H. Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, (New Edition), London, Harcourt, 1994, 267-302.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 296.

²¹ Arendt, *The Jewish Writings*, 290.

²² Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, 289.

²³ E. Said, *The Politics of Dispossession. The Struggle for Palestinian Self-Determination 1969-1994*, (New Edition), London, Vintage, 1995, 139.

²⁴ M. Bunton, *The Palestinian-Israeli Conflict: A Very Short Introduction*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2013, 58.

²⁵ Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, 287.

²⁶ Said, *Orientalism*, 286.

²⁷ Hochberg, *In Spite of Partition*, 8.

²⁸ E. Said, *Representations of the Intellectual*, (New Edition), London, Vintage, 1996, 60.

²⁹ E. Said, *Reflections on Exile and Other Literary and Cultural Essays*, (New Edition), London, Granta, 2012, 173-186.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 173.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 176.

³² *Ibid.*, 177.

³³ *Ibid.*, 186.

³⁴ E. Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, London, Vintage, 1994, 59-60.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 60.

³⁶ E. Said, 'The One-State Solution', *The New York Times*, 10 January 1999, available at: <http://www.nytimes.com/1999/01/10/magazine/the-one-state-solution.html> (last visited 3 Sep 2015).

³⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁸ ‘My Right to Return’, interview with Ari Shavit, quoted in G. Viswanathan, *Power, Politics and Culture: Interviews with Edward W. Said*, London, Bloomsbury, 2005, 458.

³⁹ Cited in Said, *Reflections on Exile*, 184.

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